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A DAY WITH ROD STEWART

FFT heads to Celtic Park with a legend

HALF-TERM REPORT

All Premier League teams analysed

FUTURE

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TOP OF THE LEAGUE

ARTETA

How Pep's apprentice led Arsenal back to the summit

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WELCOME

Hope you're enjoying the novelty of a first winter World Cup. Due to publishing deadlines there'll be no mentions of Qatar this issue, but we'll have a diary next month.

Instead we turn our attention to domestic matters and the top of the Premier League, where Mikel Arteta's Arsenal are still sitting top of the tree – the Spaniard, who worked under Pep Guardiola at Manchester City, is now leading his former boss by five points. We analyse what Arteta is doing so right and ask if they can lift their first title since 2004.

With the break in the campaign, we saw it as a perfect opportunity to cast our eye over all 20 Premier League sides and see how they are doing going into the festive and New Year fixtures.

Ever wondered what it's like to be a famous match-going fan? Well wonder no more, as *FFT* were invited to spend the day with Rod Stewart while he watched his beloved Celtic take on Dundee United.

Andrea Pirlo was one of the greatest players to grace a football pitch – now as he tries to make his way in management, we caught up with the Italian maestro for a chat.

Enjoy the rest of the World Cup and the return of domestic football later in the month.

See you next year.

James Andrew
@JamesAndrew_
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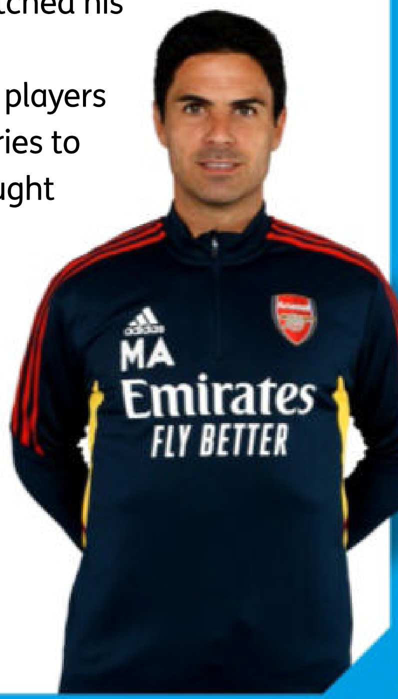
James



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5 THINGS YOU'LL LEARN INSIDE

1. Who celebrated Christmas by posing inside the mouth of a huge shark
2. Who scored a double hat-trick on his first outing for Newcastle
3. Why Jersey lined up for a competitive fixture against Lazio recently
4. Which English team once lost a match 18-0 at Norwich on Christmas Day
5. Which former Palace player is fascinated by Mongol ruler Genghis Khan

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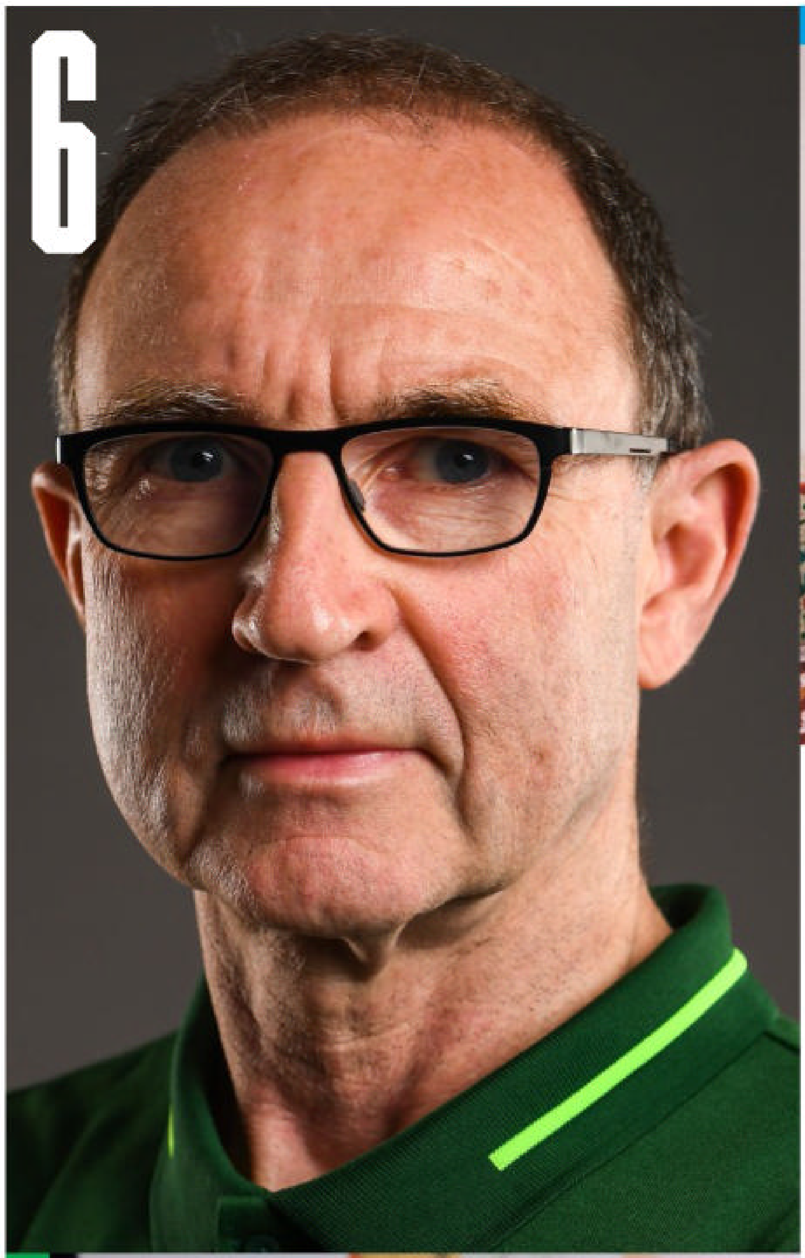

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YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Interview Chris Flanagan

"*Angels* is still my favourite Robbie Williams song – I was trying to tell him he'd done well, but it came across as, 'You've got no talent'…"

MARTIN O'NEILL

FourFourTwo is walking through London with Martin O'Neill, trying to remember the name of John Cleese's third wife.

"It wasn't Connie Booth, the one he co-wrote *Fawlty Towers* with – I think he's on good terms with her," O'Neill muses. This wasn't the conversation we expected with a double European Cup winner, but he seems happy to talk about pretty much anything.

The former Nottingham Forest player and Celtic manager had suggested meeting *FFT* outside Sloane Square tube station before wandering to a café – a pleasing throwback in itself, as few interviews in this modern era start so informally. Now 70, he has been living in central London since just before the pandemic. "We got here, then everyone started moving out," the Northern Irishman rues. Since normal life returned, he's been taking advantage of the nearby theatres and recently saw Cleese's one-man show, based around a memoir that isn't entirely complimentary of that third wife (Alyce Eichelberger, it turns out).

O'Neill has also been busy writing his autobiography, *On Days Like These*, deciding to pen it himself rather than use a ghostwriter in the way of most former footballers. We reach the café and sit in the autumn sunshine, and he's ready to talk through his career – a career that may not be finished yet…

At St Malachy's College in Belfast, you were involved in both GAA and football. Why did you pick football?
Natasha, via Instagram
While I enjoyed GAA, it was amateur and I wanted to become a professional footballer in England. I was smitten with Ferenc Puskas, then George Best came onto the scene. Unfortunately GAA had a rule that anyone playing soccer couldn't play Gaelic football – ridiculous for schoolboys. St Malachy's had a big game that should've been at Casement Park, the big GAA stadium in Belfast, but I wasn't allowed to play there, so they had to move it 60 miles.

Do you value your time at Distillery?
Ronald Carruthers, via Facebook
Immensely. The manager, Jimmy McAlinden, had won the FA Cup with Portsmouth, and he was incredibly encouraging. We won the Irish Cup [in 1971], then played Barcelona in the Cup Winners' Cup, which was amazing. Because I scored against them in the first leg at Windsor Park, it drew more attention from the English scouts, and a couple of weeks later I was playing for Nottingham Forest. [*FFT*: You gave up your Law studies to make that move in 1971, yes?] I didn't think I'd have the energy to do both. Playing in the First Division had to be all-consuming.

Brian Clough became Nottingham Forest manager in 1975, with Forest in the second tier – how did he start?
Douglas Perry, Retford
He brought me back into the team. I'd had a few arguments with the previous manager, Allan Brown. People say that I might be a little bit cantankerous… [*smiles*] In my defence, he was also arguing with John Robertson, so I wasn't the only one! When Cloughie came in, we won a couple of games, then didn't win for about 16 games. Because it was Brian Clough, though – a major figure being interviewed by Parkinson – and with what he'd done at Derby, we were delighted to have him and we felt that he would change things. It really happened when Peter Taylor came in 18 months later. Clough had his partner back, and suddenly we started to get results.

How did Forest go from finishing third in the Second Division to being First Division champions a year later?
Kevin Watts, Newark
It was miraculous. We were promoted by the skin of our teeth: three teams went up and we had to wait for a result coming through, for Bolton against Wolves. I thought Bolton were the best side in the league, but they faltered towards the end; Wolves beat them and we were promoted. Kenny Burns came in that summer, Archie Gemmill and Peter Shilton arrived, John Robertson really came to the fore and we got on a roll. Even in the First Division we attacked teams vigorously and after five or six games, we started to fear no one. All the pundits said that it would never last, but we just kept going. Then to win the European Cups – that will never happen again.

What was the most important thing you learned from Brian Clough, and did he inspire you to go into football management?
Mario CroCoach, via Facebook
For quite a complicated character, he preached simplicity: the game is simple, so don't overcomplicate it. You have your colleagues there to help you; pass the ball to them and get it back. If you're a good dribbler, try to get into positions. When you lose it, you're back in position again. A lot of those things haven't changed.

Did Clough inspire me to become a manager? I never really thought about it back then, to be honest. Actually, I bumped into Peter Taylor in the street in Nottingham one day, after he had retired from coaching and I'd retired as a player, and he said, "You disappoint me: I thought you would've gone into management – I always thought you were cut out for it." I hadn't seen that in myself until then. ▸

TEAMS (PLAYER)

1971 Distillery
1971-81 Nottingham Forest
1981 Norwich
1981-82 Manchester City
1982-83 Norwich
1983-84 Notts County
1984 Chesterfield
1985 Fulham

COUNTRY (PLAYER)

1971-84 Northern Ireland

TEAMS (MANAGER)

1987-89 Grantham
1989 Shepshed Charterhouse
1990-95 Wycombe
1995 Norwich
1995-2000 Leicester
2000-05 Celtic
2006-10 Aston Villa
2011-13 Sunderland
2013-18 Republic of Ireland
2019 Nottingham Forest

Is it true you asked Brian Clough about changing position and he told you to keep quiet or be dropped?

Philip Glover, via Facebook

I was playing on the right but I wanted to play in central midfield, so I went in to see him. He said, "What number did you wear against Wolves last week?" I said, "No.7." He asked, "What number did you wear the week before, against Everton?" I said, "No.7." He said, "What about the week before that, against Tottenham?" I said, "No.7." He said, "OK, I'll give you the choice: you can either have No.7 or No.12." So I didn't bother him any more! [*Laughs*] At times I thought I could have done with a bit more praise from him, but if he felt that the way of getting the best out of me was by always being harsh on me, fine. If it meant I was going to win a European Cup, I'll take it!

Can you describe your emotions when Nottingham Forest won their first European Cup against Malmo, in 1979, but you didn't play in the final because of injury?

Victoria Rees, Coalville

Myself, Archie Gemmill and Frank Clark got injured just beforehand. I got a dead leg that became a blood clot. I went to a brilliant physiotherapist in Nottingham to get treatment – the club didn't know about that, but I had to make a big effort and I didn't feel I was making any progress. We all declared ourselves fit, but Cloughie said, "I think you're all not telling the truth." He could only go with one of us, so he started Frank Clark.

"I understand these days that, as a manager, if you've got three players injured, you can't be going into a final thinking, 'Christ, he could break down in about 10 minutes'. But I had been part of the side and it was a major disappointment not to play – the chances of Nottingham Forest being in the final again seemed slim. For me, things turned out great a year later. For Archie, who left for Birmingham, it was really sad.

How did it feel to beat Hamburg and help Nottingham Forest to win a second successive European Cup?

Richard West, Beeston

Just over a decade before that, George Best had won the European Cup – to play in the final myself and win it… I don't think there's any feeling like it in club football. I had almost joined Coventry that January. They wanted to change things around and I was having a bit of a fight again – my usual! But the move fell through, and I'm delighted that it did. By the end of May, I'd won the European Cup.

Clockwise from right "Cheer up, love"; beating Spain in their own World Cup is one of Northern Ireland's greatest wins; shirt-swapping makes for some confusing celebration photos; this time, O'Neill played in the European Cup final

You played alongside George Best for Northern Ireland; would you have wanted him in a team you managed?

Emilio Martinez Baniela, via Instagram

That's if George turned up! [*Laughs*] George was a one-off, a fabulous footballer, and it's a shame that he wasn't able to display his skills on the world stage for Northern Ireland – we qualified in 1982, by which time he was well past his best, but I still feel he could have been in that squad. But being on the same field as him: you grow up and he's a hero, then you're actually trying to pass the ball to him.

When I was manager of Wycombe, I was getting an old international XI together [for the last game at the club's old Loakes Park ground], and I hadn't spoken to him for a long time but I phoned him and he said, "Yeah, I'll be there." He doubled the crowd and he spent all day and evening with us. He was so generous with his time.

How did Northern Ireland beat the hosts, Spain, at the 1982 World Cup?

Jason Evans, Stafford

We knew we'd be under the cosh but, as captain, I said to the players that we would get a couple of opportunities and we had to take them. People talk about gameplans, and there's a great Mike Tyson quote that everyone has a gameplan until they get hit in the mouth, but teams found it difficult to play through us. Gerry Armstrong scored, and it was a fantastic victory. [*FFT*: How do you feel now about being named Northern Ireland's first Catholic captain?] Eternally grateful to Billy Bingham. At that time, the Troubles were pretty severe. He took a bit of flak for making that decision, but he said, "No, you're the man for the job."

What made you take the Grantham Town job, your first as a manager?

Dave Jones, via Twitter

After Peter Taylor's comment to me, I started to apply for jobs but didn't

“SUNDERLAND AREN’T AS DIFFICULT TO MANAGE AS PEOPLE SEEM TO FIND IT”

get interviews. Chesterfield turned me down, Stockport turned me down, then I went for an interview at Bradford and the vice-chairman really liked me but Terry Dolan was doing well as interim manager, so he was first-choice, which I understood. Then a director from Grantham knocked on my door and said, “Would you come and manage us?” I said, “What division are you in?’ He said, “The Beazer Homes Midland Division.” I said, “What division is that?” But it was an opportunity.

Everybody says, “Oh, you can learn your trade down there” – I don’t agree, because you can fail miserably and never get another chance. A director at a Championship club would say, “He didn’t do too well at Grantham – why would he do well here?” Non-league is fraught with difficulty, but you park your ego to the side and get on with it. I loved it at Grantham, and I started to get a flavour for management.

What was your best moment managing Wycombe Wanderers?
Luke Barrie, via Instagram
My ambition was to get them into the Football League, so the day we did that was great, added to the two FA Trophies we won. Then, in our first year in the Football League, we beat Preston in the play-off final to go up again – they had David Moyes and a young Gareth Ainsworth, but we were brilliant and won 4-2. To beat Preston, with their history, was lovely. Wycombe are very dear to my heart.

What was it like playing for Norwich and managing them a decade later?
Nash Anibesa, via Instagram
I played for them twice. I left Forest to go there for the last 11 games of the 1980-81 season, but we got relegated; then I left for Manchester City but went back because I loved Norwich City. We won promotion. I wasn’t there long as manager – I fell out with Robert Chase, the chairman. He took some stick for it but I could’ve handled it better myself. [*FFT*: You were upset he hadn’t bid for Hull’s Dean Windass as promised, then the Leicester job became available...?] Essentially, Windass might not have wanted to come – but we at should at least have put an offer in. That never materialised. Then Leicester came up.

How special was it to win Leicester’s first major trophy for 33 years?
Christian Burton, Melton Mowbray
The turnaround from having a really tough start at Leicester – seemingly not being wanted there, the crowd baying for your blood – to winning promotion and then winning the League Cup a year later, in 1997, was terrific. It was a special evening when we won it, up at Hillsborough in a replay against Middlesbrough. [*FFT*: How did you turn it around following that difficult start?] I just had to just win some games, and luckily I made some astute signings: Neil Lennon, Muzzy Izzet and Stevie Claridge were really influential, and a young Emile Heskey was coming through. The camaraderie was quite strong. The players put heart and soul into it.

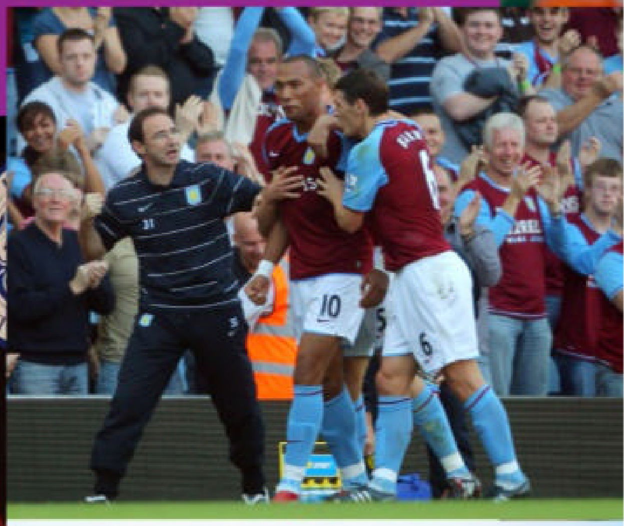
THE Coca-Cola CUP
1997 WINNERS

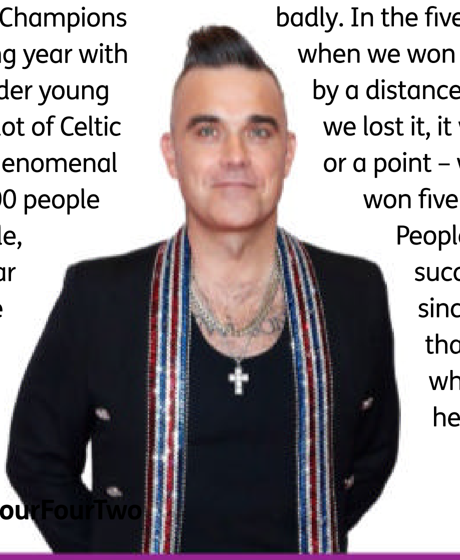
How big of a challenge was it to manage Robbie Savage?
Robert Burke, Exeter
Robbie really wasn’t difficult to manage. He did think he could buy a flash car in his first couple of days, but once he was told to put the car away, sell it and buy something more sensible, and that he could buy the car after he’d made the grade, he picked up those lessons and was brilliant.

Was Stan Collymore a good shot with a fire extinguisher?
Martin Thompson, via Facebook
[*Smiles*] I wasn’t even there when that happened. The players had arrived at La Manga and spent the evening there, then I was coming out the day after because I’d been watching a game. The next morning, I got a call from my assistant manager, John Robertson, to say they had been thrown out of the hotel because of Collymore’s antics [letting off a fire extinguisher in the bar]. He’d only just signed, too! But Stan was Stan. He was high-spirited at the time. I wasn’t best pleased with him, but he apologised and we won the League Cup again not long after that, then he scored a hat-trick against Sunderland the following week. He was a really good footballer. He broke his leg a few weeks later, which was a shame. He’d found a spiritual home at Leicester, but I left for Celtic not long after that, and he might have needed my influence around him.

After sharing the BBC studio with him during France 98 and famously giving him your assessment of his talents, what’s your favourite Robbie Williams song?
Mark White, via Instagram
[*Laughs*] I did say then that *Angels* is a great song! That’s his best. I wanted to say to him that despite the fact he hadn’t written the songs in Take That, and despite the fact that he’d been bombed out of the band, he was doing well. But it came across as, ‘Listen, you have no talent’. He even said, “Oh, thanks a lot!” It became a moment, but if I hadn’t been interrupted by Alan Hansen, I would have said that he was doing really well. I think he was holding a concert in Paris and came to see us because he loved Des Lynam. But he took what I said in good jest.

I met him later when I was manager of Celtic: we were in the same hotel and he invited me to his concert the next day. I couldn’t go, but he’s a good lad. And what a great career he’s had. ▸





Clockwise from above "Stan tried to put out a fire but it turned out to be Neil Lennon's hair, that's all"; Villa never knew how good they had it; loving a famous Irish win against Italy; "More trophies! More!"; the end came suddenly at Sunderland for O'Neill **Below** Take that, Robbie

Is it true that the first thing you said to your Celtic squad, upon joining the club in 2000, was that they should be ashamed to finish 21 points behind Rangers? When did you feel they could not only close that gap but immediately win a domestic treble?
Lewis Murray, via Facebook
I asked a couple of players what had happened in the previous season: was it because Rangers were so brilliant, or because Celtic had been so bad? They said it was probably a combination of both. Early in pre-season, I could see their point – I didn't think we were too good.

But Chris Sutton was a big signing. He was having a tough time at Chelsea but I knew what he could do, and his partnership with Henrik Larsson was crucial to everything. I signed Didier Agathe on one side, Alan Thompson on the other, then Neil Lennon came in at Christmas. It was a combination of the signings and telling the players: "We can do this". [*FFT*: How pivotal was August's 6-2 win over Rangers in your first Old Firm derby?] It's still discussed now as a big turning point: it gave us belief that we could compete with them. They beat us in November [5-1], but that was the last time we lost for the rest of the season, until it was over and we had already won the league.

My dad always said that if you get the chance to play for Celtic, do it. I didn't get that, but managing them was the second-best thing.

You reached the UEFA Cup final with Celtic in 2003. How would that team have fared in the Premier League?
'Anpan85', via Instagram
We beat Blackburn on that run and we knocked out Liverpool in the quarter-finals. To win at Anfield was no mean achievement. So, how do I think we would have done? Firstly, if Celtic were in the Premier League, they'd go from 60,000 to 80,000 – they would have to build an extension to the stadium and that would make them big news. I'm really biased, but I would have no hesitation in saying we would've easily been in the top six.

Porto beat us in the final. We could easily have won that game, and they went on to win the Champions League the following year with the same team, under young [Jose] Mourinho. A lot of Celtic fans say it was a phenomenal time because 75,000 people descended on Seville, and it's great to hear that, but for me, we lost the final and so it became a big disappointment.

On a scale of one to 10, how much did Helicopter Sunday hurt, when Rangers won the league in the final minutes of the season in 2004-05?
Paul Thoms, via Facebook
Oh, 11. We should have beaten Motherwell 8-1 that day – their goalkeeper [41-year-old Gordon Marshall, who had played 100 league games for Celtic] was fantastic, we missed goal after goal, and while we were only 1-0 up, you felt something was going to materialise at the other end. Scott McDonald smashed in a great goal, then we were pressing forward and he scored again. That hurt badly. In the five years I was there, when we won the league we won it by a distance, and in the two years we lost it, it was either by a goal or a point – we could easily have won five on the bounce. [*FFT*: People called you the most successful Celtic manager since Jock Stein. How did that feel?] You know what? I'm going to boast here and say that I think that's right. I honestly think our team was as good as they'd had since Jock Stein left, and that would have been proven had we won the UEFA Cup.

HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 1980
Helps Nottingham Forest to beat Hamburg in European Cup final

LOW: 1985
Forced to retire aged 32 due to knee problems

HIGH: 1997
Guides Leicester to first of two League Cup triumphs

LOW: 2003
Celtic edged out in UEFA Cup final by Jose Mourinho's Porto

HIGH: 2016
Republic of Ireland beat Italy to reach last 16 of Euro 2016

As a manager, has your fascination with criminology ever helped you to pick out certain aspects in players?
Matt Walters, via Facebook
That would take a longer time for discussion than we have at this moment! But, as a manager, it's about man-management – getting into the minds of players – so I suppose, if you start to study criminology, it may have happened somewhere along the way.

I became interested in criminology when I was six or seven. A crime of passion took place in my village, in Kilrea. My father told me about it and I became fascinated with wanting to go to the exact spot, and it carried on from there. It's true that I have been to some high-profile trials, but I won't say which ones because the families of the people involved might think it's a ghoulish thing, and it's not. I have visited the place where JFK was shot, though. I can say I've done that.

Did you believe you could take Aston Villa into the Champions League?
Cameron Elliott, Tamworth
Absolutely. That was my aim, hence the fall-out when I played a couple of youngsters in a UEFA Cup match at CSKA Moscow. I needed the players to play Stoke when we came back, and I felt that because we were still only in the last 32 and had drawn the first leg at home, it would be difficult in Russia. I still went with quite a strong side, but the criticism I received for losing that game... if I were asked to do it again, though, I would do exactly the same. I thought everybody would be with me in trying to get into the Champions League, but because we faltered at the end and finished sixth, they throw everything at you. We finished in the

top six for three consecutive years. I think they would take that now.

Why did you leave Villa just a week before the 2010-11 season started?
Dom Lerner, via Instagram
I had a fall-out with the owner [Randy Lerner]. Hindsight is a wonderful thing – I shouldn't have done it. I should've buried the hatchet and got on with it.

A lot of good managers have found life tough at Sunderland. Why was it so tricky to manage the club?
Charlie Hunter, Leeds
No, they're not as difficult to manage as people seem to have found it, and they had a fantastic crowd. Before my first game, we were third from bottom, then we won so many games early on that people thought, 'This is easy'. We didn't strengthen well enough during the summer [of 2012] and I would've liked to have had a bit more time after that. We had 31 points from 31 games, so all we needed was another five points to stay up, which I think I would have got, but the owner made the change and brought in [Paolo] Di Canio. I was really disappointed: Sunderland were my boyhood team, because an Irishman called Charlie Hurley played for them. Sixteen months isn't a great deal of time – if Sam Allardyce gets the England job on the strength of keeping Sunderland up… well, that's a bit strange how it turned out.

> “HOW WOULD CELTIC HAVE DONE IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE BACK THEN? TOP SIX, EASY”

How big a moment was it to beat group winners Italy and guide the Republic of Ireland into the last 16 of Euro 2016?
Jordan Cole, Lowestoft
Monumental. Some of my friends watched the game at a race meeting in Ireland and said it was phenomenal; that the whole country was roaring and cheering. We missed a chance to win it and I thought, 'Oh, that's your chance gone'. Then suddenly Robbie Brady came in with as brave a header as you're ever likely to see. Fantastic.

Why didn't you bring on Declan Rice as a late substitute when we were beating Moldova in the 2018 World Cup qualifying campaign?
Evan O'Mahony, via Facebook
No, no, that would have been unfair – that's just not right. And he wasn't a sub in that game. He played in three friendlies for us – he was never a sub in any other game. A lot of the press guys in Dublin were pressing that point but it's just not morally right when someone might have the choice. I am sure he and his father would've known the rules but I would've told them, "By the way, if you play in a competitive international, that means you can only play for us from then on." Declan was brilliant for us and I had a really good communication with his father, but he was born in England, he had a right to choose, he chose England, and he's done really well. It was the same with Jack Grealish: the choice was his, and I have absolutely no problem with someone making their own decision. This idea that you'd coerce them into playing for us? Absolutely not.

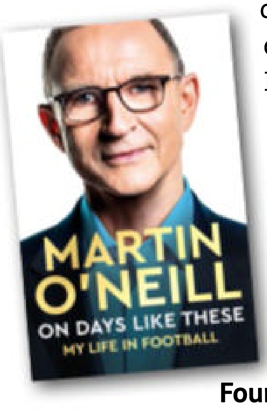
Why did your time as the Republic of Ireland's manager come to an end?
Tomas Hodgins Byrne, via Instagram
We were beaten by Wales in the [2018-19] Nations League and we drew our two games against Denmark, but it all came from having lost the World Cup play-off to Denmark [in November 2017]. They did well at the World Cup, so it was never going to be an easy game. We scored first in Dublin, then they scored twice and we needed a couple of goals. I knew that bringing on Aiden McGeady and wee Wes Hoolahan was going to weaken us physically, but we had to get goals back. Denmark just kept hitting us and hitting us, and we lost 5-1.

But people forget we were in that play-off after qualifying from a group where we were fourth seeds. Then, in the Nations League, I was trying to bring in fresh blood and I don't think anyone was aware at that stage of the complete rules of the competition. It's disappointing how it ended – I felt that the Irish media were digging in a lot. But if that's what they wanted, fine.

Could you have managed England?
'Barbariantraining', via Instagram
I was interviewed for it, yeah. Steve McClaren had been working with Sven-Goran Eriksson and he got the job. I'd left Celtic after my wife was ill, but she was getting better and it was a real honour to be interviewed for the England job. Regardless of the criticism you might get, it's one of the great managerial jobs in world football.

What went wrong during your brief tenure at Nottingham Forest under Evangelos Marinakis?
Agustin Ibarra Villagra, via Instagram
Well, I got 19 games, of which I won the last three, and honestly there's not much more I'm going to say about it. If they wanted to go down another route, good luck.

Would you consider returning to management?
Simon Robinson, Belfast
Yes. I've probably hidden behind COVID – when everybody's lives seemed to be on hold – but I absolutely would. Roy Hodgson was managing until recently and he's much older than myself; I feel very young, agile and fit. I haven't actively sought anything, though, and I don't have anyone working on my behalf. It's probably to your detriment that nobody is putting your name around – I haven't had contact with any clubs. But if you're asking if I'd think about it, I certainly wouldn't dismiss it. The game is in my blood, and it always will be.

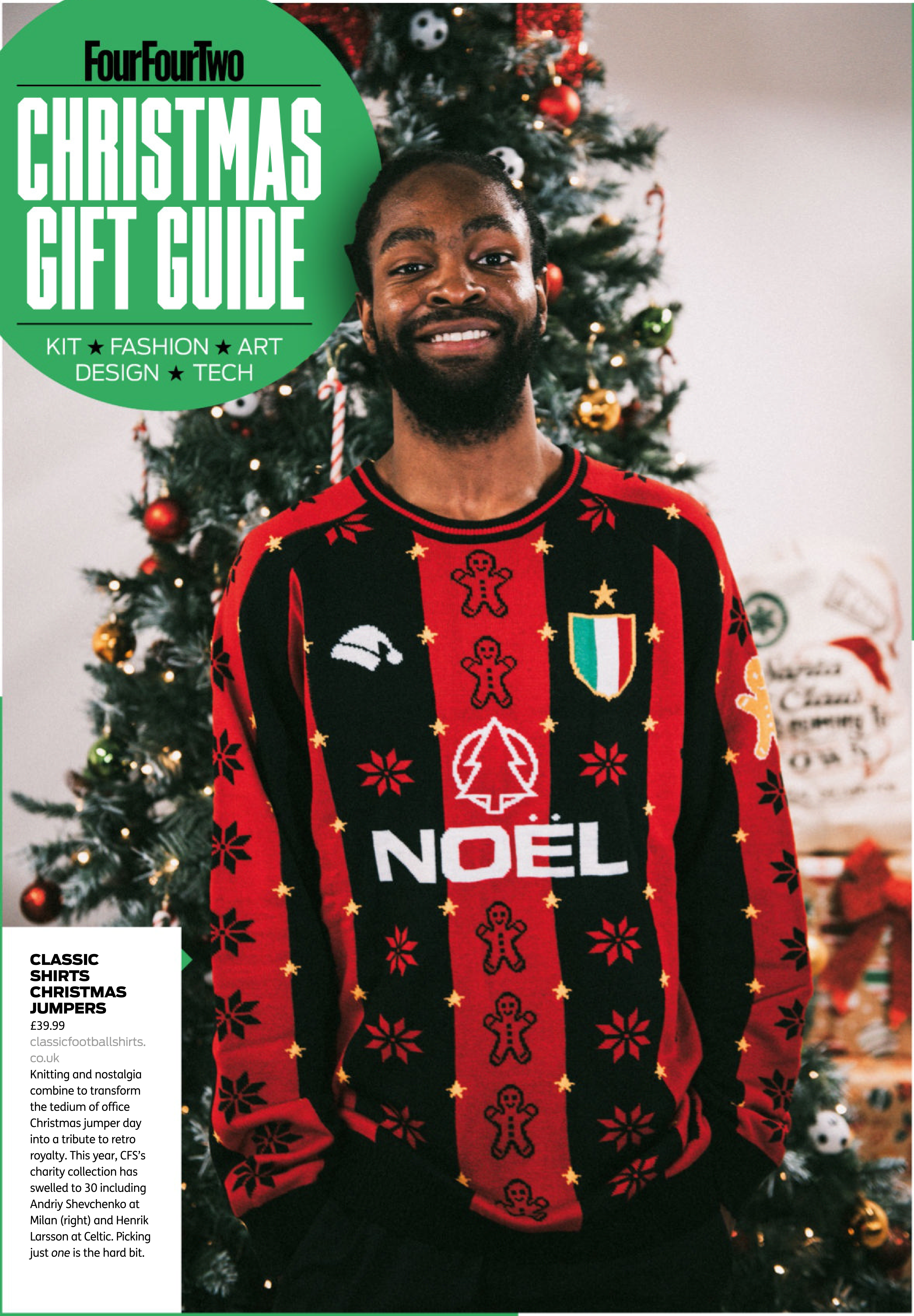


Martin O'Neill's new book, published by Macmillan, is available to buy today

FourFourTwo

CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE

KIT ★ FASHION ★ ART
DESIGN ★ TECH



CLASSIC SHIRTS CHRISTMAS JUMPERS
£39.99
classicfootballshirts.co.uk

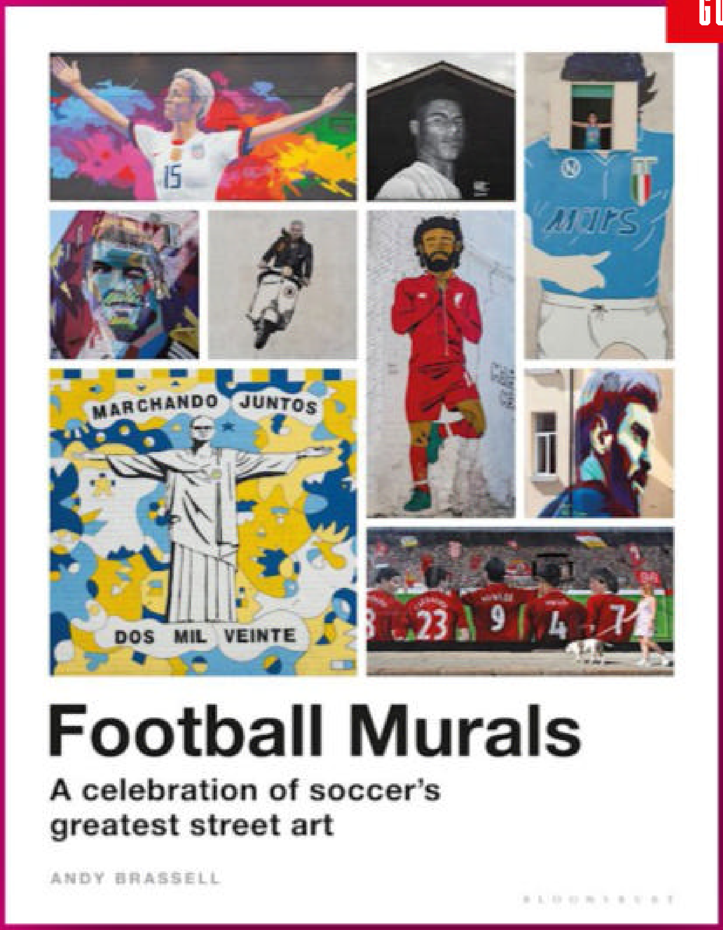
Knitting and nostalgia combine to transform the tedium of office Christmas jumper day into a tribute to retro royalty. This year, CFS's charity collection has swelled to 30 including Andriy Shevchenko at Milan (right) and Henrik Larsson at Celtic. Picking just *one* is the hard bit.

92 SCRATCH-OFF MAP £13.99

amazon.co.uk

Time to tick off that rainy night in Stoke, Forest Green's vegan burgers, the top-tier calorie burn of Newcastle away and the 'what-am-I-doing-with-my-life?' journeys to Brunton Park. 'Doing the 92' is some achievement and this satisfying scratch-off map plots your Football League odyssey to utopia.

FOOTBALL GROUNDS


MARCHANDO JUNTOS
DOS MIL VEINTE
Football Murals
A celebration of soccer's greatest street art
ANDY BRASSELL
BLOOMSBURY

FOOTBALL MURALS: A CELEBRATION OF SOCCER'S GREATEST STREET ART £20

bloomsbury.com

Coffee tables were invented for books like this. From Rooney and Rapinoe to Cruyff and Cristiano, football writer and broadcaster Andy Brassell explores the fascinating phenomenon of these giant street daubings, going deep into the history, culture and significance of over 100 gorgeous murals. Beautiful.

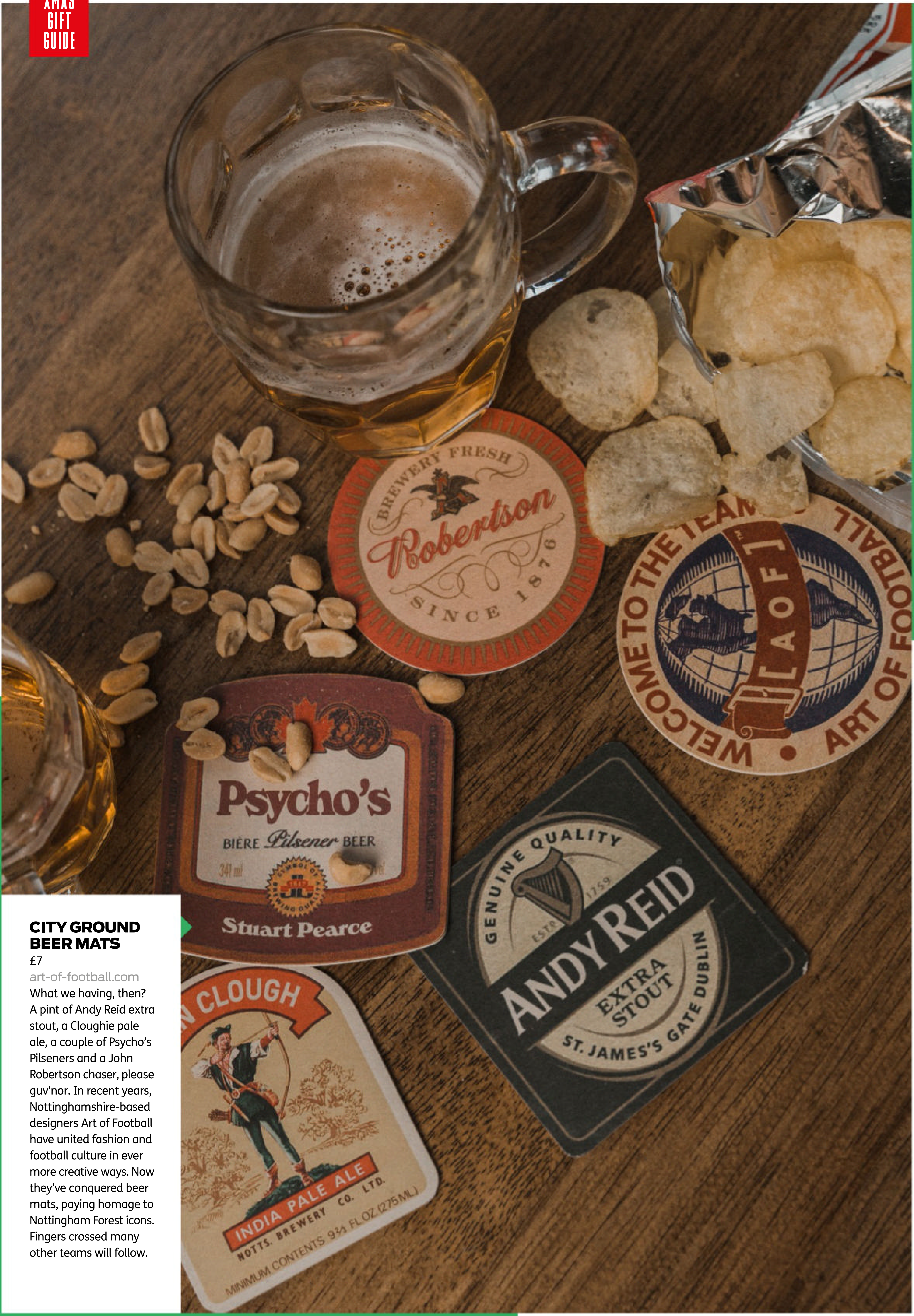
LOTTO
STADIO

LOTTO STADIO 200 II FG

£95

prodirectsoccer.com

Like the Adidas Copa Mundial, this is an 'ain't broke, don't fix it' boot design that has all you need in a pair of five-a-side wheels. If the fold-over tongue and comfortable K-leather were good enough for Cafu and Gazza in the Serie A glory years, they'll do a lovely job at Goals in Ruislip.


BREWERY FRESH
Robertson
SINCE 1876
WELCOME TO THE TEAM
ART OF FOOTBALL
[A O F]
Psycho's
BIÈRE Pilsener BEER
341 ml
Stuart Pearce
GENUINE QUALITY
ESTD 1759
ANDY REID
EXTRA STOUT
ST. JAMES'S GATE DUBLIN
CLOUGH
INDIA PALE ALE
NOTTS. BREWERY CO. LTD.
MINIMUM CONTENTS 9⅔ FL.OZ (275ML)

CITY GROUND BEER MATS

£7

art-of-football.com

What we having, then? A pint of Andy Reid extra stout, a Cloughie pale ale, a couple of Psycho's Pilseners and a John Robertson chaser, please guv'nor. In recent years, Nottinghamshire-based designers Art of Football have united fashion and football culture in ever more creative ways. Now they've conquered beer mats, paying homage to Nottingham Forest icons. Fingers crossed many other teams will follow.

ENGLAND 1970 BLACK-OUT NO.6 £40

scoredraw.com

It was Sir Alf Ramsey and Umbro’s experiment (based on military attire used in the Middle East) – Aertex shirts, made of a cellular lightweight material, to keep the lads cool in the intense Mexico heat. Retro football clobber brand Score Draw have reproduced them in stealthy black, complete with Bobby Moore’s famous No.6. It’ll look stunning underneath your big coat this winter.

Subbuteo
ENGLAND WOMEN'S TEAM
England Lionesses Game
SUBBUTEO

LIONESSES SUBBUTEO

£45

englandstore.com

Subbuteo was born in August 1946 with an advert in *The Boy’s Own Paper,* promising a tabletop game containing “all the thrills of real football!” Only 76 years later England’s Lionesses have their own set, based on Euros-winning stars Lucy Bronze, Fran Kirby & Co. Just don’t tread on one. That’s real pain.

PHANTOM
ZOOM
TIEMPO

NIKE GENERATION PACK

£250

prodirect.com

Nike took inspiration from the trophy when designing their dazzling World Cup kicks. Metallic gold dominates the Phantom GT2, Mercurial and Tiempo ranges, supplemented by a flash of pinky-purple. There’s some cryptic letters and numbers dotted around them, too, appearing to be the co-ordinates for Nike HQ in Portland and the formula ‘20(xx)^2/ Q’, which we think is maths for, er, ‘Qatar 2022’. Yes? Do we win a prize?

The UNOFFICIAL
WORLD CUP ALBUM
A POORLY ILLUSTRATED INCOMPLETE HISTORY
From the 'artists' known as
NO SCORE DRAWS
HARRY KANE
LUIS SUÁREZ
2006
FRANCE
ZINEDINE ZIDANE
ZIDANE
10
2006
ENGLAND
WAYNE ROONEY
2006
PORTUGAL
CRISTIANO RONALDO
ENGLAN
GARY LINEKER
DIE
MARAD
ENTINA
RONALDO
2002 FIFA WORLD CUP
SOUTHGATE

THE UNOFFICIAL WORLD CUP ALBUM: A POORLY ILLUSTRATED INCOMPLETE HISTORY

£10.99

harpercollins.co.uk

Alex and Sian, aka Twitter's @CheapPanini, are a couple from Oxford who decided to ink every entry inside their 2014 World Cup sticker book because they couldn't justify the cost of filling it normally. Three World Cups later, their terrible art is celebrated by fans worldwide and they're now published authors.

LIONESSES TOP TRUMPS £8

amazon.co.uk

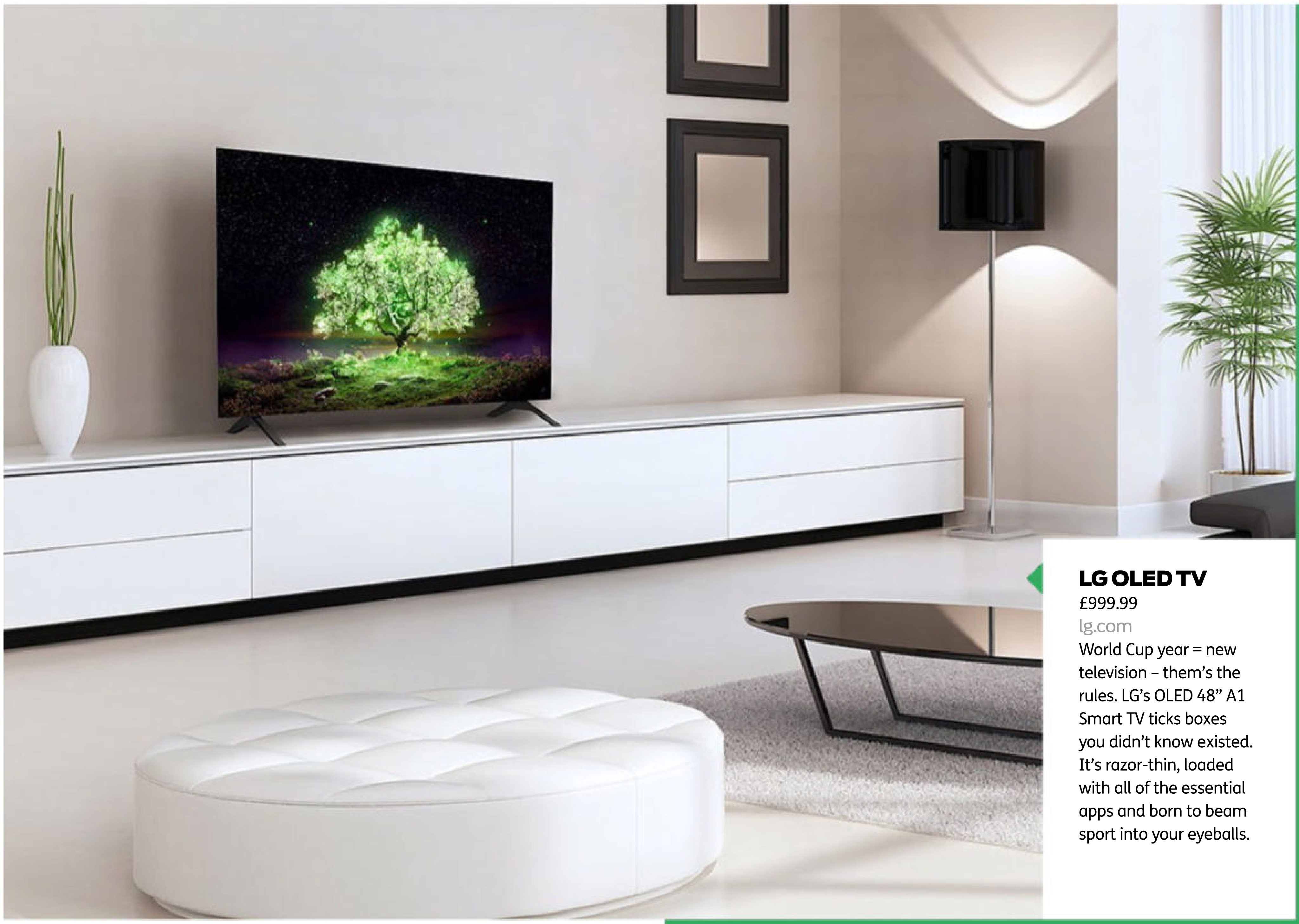
You must be doing something right if you're the subject of a Top Trump. The classic card game has ranked pop culture since the late 1970s, and 30 of the heroic Lionesses have now been immortalised in card format. Appearances, goals, trophies, height and an overall Top Trump rating separate your Russos from your Roebucks, with custom mini biographies for each player added too.

TOP TRUMPS
TOP TRUMPS SPECIALS
WOMEN'S EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CHAMPIONS
Alessia Russo 23
FW
DOB 08/02/99
Height 5'9"
Apps 13
Goals 9
Trophies 2
Top Trumps Rating 94
Leah Williamson 8
TOP TRUMP
MF
DOB 29/03/97
Height 5'7"
Apps 37
Goals 2
Trophies 3
Top Trumps Rating 100

THE NATIONS' COLLECTION BY UMBRO £50

umbro.com

Umbro have dug into their wonderful double diamond archive to remix 10 idolised international kit designs – Brazil, Mexico (above), Germany and, yes, England are among the nations whose back catalogues have been lifted into the 21st century. Football, fabric and fandom have collided and it's chef's-kiss good. If a jacket is more your thing, don't worry, they've done those as well.



LG OLED TV

£999.99

lg.com

World Cup year = new television – them's the rules. LG's OLED 48" A1 Smart TV ticks boxes you didn't know existed. It's razor-thin, loaded with all of the essential apps and born to beam sport into your eyeballs.

MEANWHILE AT...

...Christmas, things can get pretty silly – featuring Middlesbrough, Gazza and a pitch-invading Santa streaker

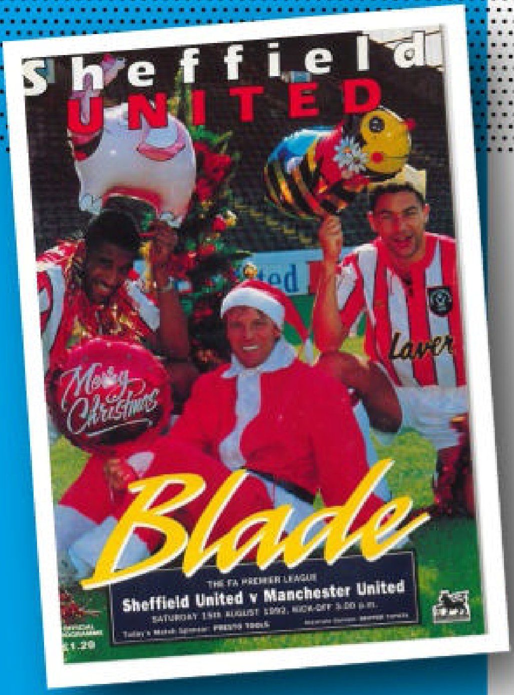
1 "RAY PARLOUR, IS THAT YOU?"

When Middlesbrough hosted Newcastle United in a Tyne-Tees derby clash in December 1998, two of the crowd had a secret plan.

Newly promoted Boro had signed Paul Gascoigne from Rangers that summer and lost just two of their opening 15 Premier League matches, in an odd start to the campaign which yielded 10 draws in their first 18 games in all competitions.

Relentless stalemates didn't keep the crowds away: among the 34,000 at the Newcastle fixture were stripper Rachel Sadler and pal Vanessa Richards, who both invaded the pitch, charging towards Gazza "in an attempt to cheer him up". With Sadler wearing nothing but a G-string, and Richards sporting an increasingly revealing Santa costume [above], the plan sort of worked – Gazza nervously giggled away, shouting, "You can't do this to me", as Richards attempted to jump on his back.

The duo were later both banned from the Riverside Stadium and, having been escorted out, missed the end of the match. Not that there was any doubt about the outcome – it was a draw, of course.


Sheffield UNITED
Merry Christmas
Blade
THE FA PREMIER LEAGUE
Sheffield United v Manchester United
SATURDAY 15th AUGUST 1992, KICK-OFF 3.00 p.m.
£1.20

2

“BOSS, IT’S AUGUST?”

Sheffield United tended to start seasons slowly in the early ’90s, so boss Dave Bassett had an idea – celebrate Christmas in August, and see if the players start reproducing their post-festivities form.

In 1992 then, they laid on a pub Christmas party, with decorations and crackers – Bassett even posed as Santa for the programme for their opening game against Man United.

It worked: Brian Deane bagged the Premier League’s first-ever goal inside five minutes as the Blades won 2-1, although they then lost five of their next six games to drop to second-bottom of the table. Maybe they should have had a Christmas party every week...

3

JUMPING THE SHARK

If there’s one thing we all know in life, it’s that nothing says Christmas quite like Bojan Krkic posing inside the mouth of a giant shark.

The forward was at the height of his Barcelona fame in December 2009, when he made the trip to the city’s aquarium, swam with sharks while wearing a snorkel and Santa hat (because, why not?), then was asked to pose inside a prehistoric jaw.

Despite the creature having died thousands of years earlier and posing no threat at all, the look of uncertainty on Bojan’s face [above] suggests he probably had a deep-seated fear of such menacing gnashers – no wonder he quit the Camp Nou for good a week after Luis Suarez’s arrival in 2014.

4

JESUS CHRIST: SON OF GOLDEN BALLS

Remember that Christmas when David Beckham posed as the father of Jesus, while Kylie Minogue randomly hovered above him as an angel?

All right, that didn’t actually happen in real life, although it was depicted at Madame Tussauds in 2004: Posh Spice was mocked up as Mary, while the Bethlehem nativity scene also starred Hugh Grant, Graham Norton and Samuel L Jackson as shepherds.

Prince Philip was joined among the Wise Men by George W Bush and Tony Blair. This being 2004, they’d probably made their presence known in the Middle East after hearing that the newborn baby could deploy biological weapons within 45 minutes.

5

GAEL FORCE

When Disneyland Paris were launching their Christmas season in 2014, they thought long and hard about which footballer to invite to draw in the crowds. Karim Benzema? Paul Pogba? What about a 15-year-old Kylian Mbappe?

No, Disneyland decided to go big or go home – they lured in the greatest star of all: Manchester City left-back Gael Clichy, who hadn’t played for the national team for a year, and isn’t even from Paris.

Lining up for photos, Clichy gave the appearance of a man embroiled in some sort of hostage situation, forced to pose with Anna and Elsa against his will [above]. “I should be playing Swansea on Saturday, send help.”

6

BAD SANTA

When *FFT* headed to the Arctic Circle to meet FC Santa Claus in 2016, things were looking up.

True, they’d been relegated from Finland’s third tier in the previous season – losing one game 16-0 after having to field three goalkeepers in their starting line-up – but Chinese investment had arrived and they were about to go on tour to Beijing.

They visited China in 2017 as well, lining up against Michael Owen and Alessandro Del Piero in a charity game, but things have gone wrong since then – they finished bottom of the fourth tier in 2018, bottom of the fifth tier in 2019, then disbanded.

They relaunched in the sixth tier in 2021 and, yes, you’ve guessed it – they finished bottom.

7

“HOW DO YOU DO, FELLOW KIDS?”

We’re not saying David James was a festive jinx, but he was at clubs for two infamous Christmas party incidents in Premier League history.

At West Ham in 2001, Hayden Foxe was caught peeing against a nightclub bar; three years later at Man City, Joey Barton stubbed a cigar out in the eye of Jamie Tandy. James was involved in neither drama – in 2004, he was busy posing as “LG’s new-look urban Santa, Father X” [above], supposedly “the result of a survey of 16 to 24-year-olds, claiming Santa needs a new image to appeal to today’s youth”.

Quite how a 34-year-old goalkeeper fit into that, we’re not entirely sure, although it’s probably just as well they didn’t hire 22-year-old Barton instead.

SPROUTS DIRECT

8

FOOTBALL IS SERVED

If you want an ex-pro for a mad promotional campaign, there’s one man who’s top of everyone’s list: King Eric himself.

Having pretended to be a farmer to flog beer, and randomly pitched up in a Nike Brazilian airport advert, despite not being Brazilian in any way, this year Cantona has been serving up an Adidas football on a platter, wearing an apron saying ‘Sprouts Direct’.

The Frenchman has been the star of Sports Direct’s Christmas PR – after the fine success of Steve Bruce’s reign at Newcastle, Mike Ashley kept faith with the not-in-any-way-at-all-flawed plan of hiring members of Man United’s ’90s title-winning team. At least 50,000 Geordies didn’t turn up to boo this one when he arrived on set...

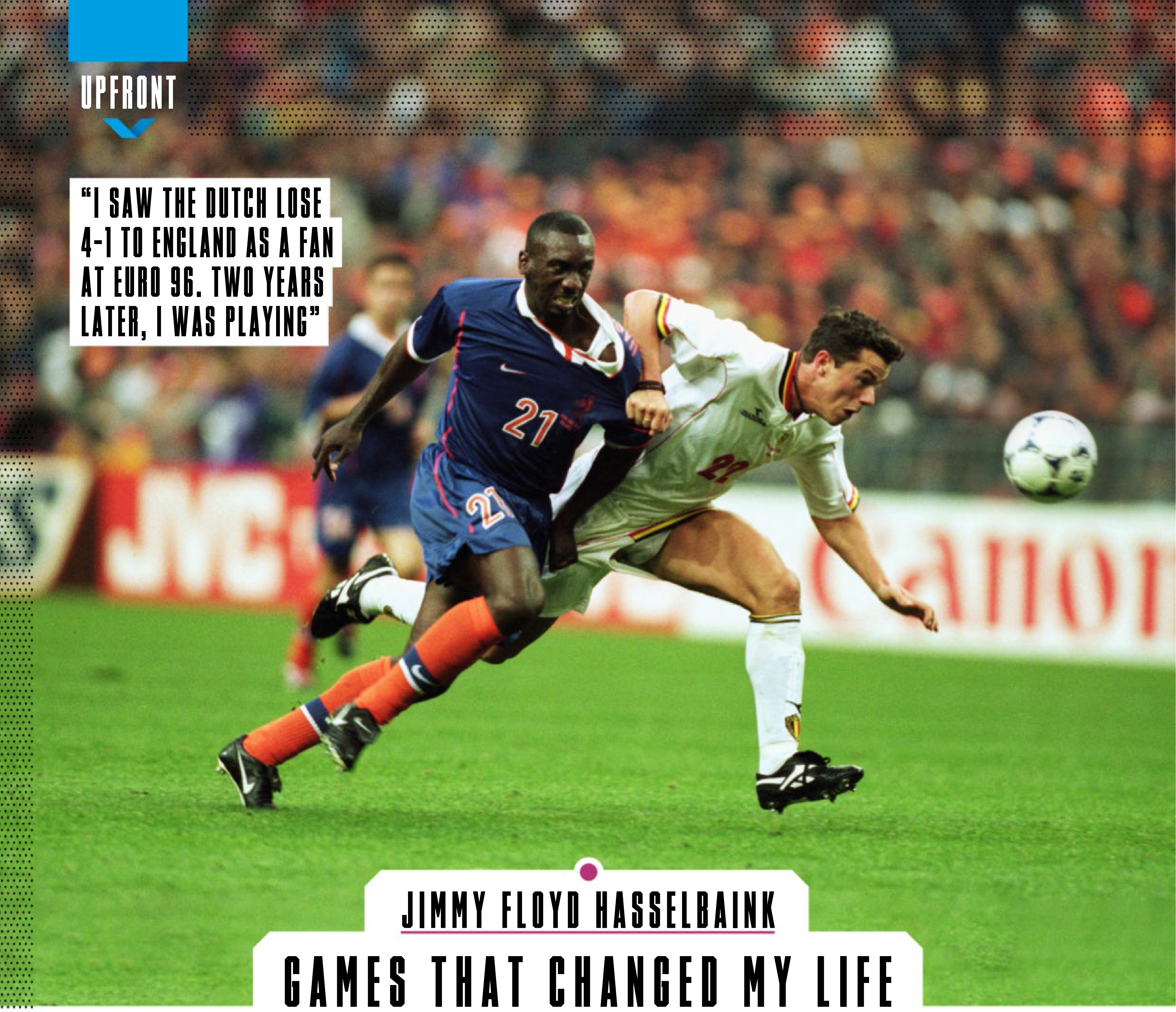
9

POOPING XAVI: BUY NOW FOR JUST €21

In the UK, Christmas is a time for joy and innocent celebration. Over in Catalonia, they mark it with figurines of famous people taking a dump.

The peculiar habit comes from the traditional Catalan nativity scene, featuring a bloke defecating in the corner of the picture – almost as if someone added it in centuries ago for a joke, and they’ve just stuck with it.

Before Christmas, you can purchase *caganers* (poopers) of famous people excreting – including Xavi, dropping a log for your entertainment, as a boss and a player. Urinating figurines aren’t yet available, although Xavi’s toilet habits are famously exemplary – every time he’s spent a penny at Barcelona, he’s always made sure to pull a lever.



“I SAW THE DUTCH LOSE 4-1 TO ENGLAND AS A FAN AT EURO 96. TWO YEARS LATER, I WAS PLAYING”

JIMMY FLOYD HASSELBAINK

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Words Chris Flanagan

V. Setubal 2-2 Boavista

May 4, 1997

Primeira Divisao

“My first match is for Boavista against Vitoria Setubal – you didn’t expect me to choose this one, did you?! [*Laughs*] The Leeds manager George Graham was in the stadium – he saw me for the first time, he was scouting me. I scored, and from that moment he liked me, and a deal to join Leeds started to get going with my agent. I scored 20 league goals for Boavista that season. I couldn’t stop scoring, we had a really good year, with me and Nuno Gomes up front – we played a lot of games together. Back in the Netherlands, we got the BBC and *Match of the Day*, so I always wanted to play in England, and I got that opportunity thanks to this game. When the opportunity came, I didn’t need to think about it – I just took it.”

Leeds 1-1 Arsenal

August 9, 1997

Premier League

“This was my debut for Leeds, and I scored. It was very special, playing against Arsenal – Ian Wright was one of the strikers you looked at in the Premier League, to see how he did things, how he scored his goals. To play against Steve Bould in your first match, against that famous back four, and to score against David Seaman, it just felt so good. I went one-on-one with him, a defender was closing in and I had to make a quick decision to shoot. I think Seaman thought I was going to aim for the near corner, but I went for the far corner, he slipped a bit with his left foot and the ball went in. A very special moment – your debut at a packed Elland Road, with all the fans going absolutely mental. I still get goosebumps when I think about it.”

Netherlands 0-0 Belgium

June 13, 1998

World Cup

“This [above] was my World Cup debut. I didn’t know I was going to be called up for that tournament, I was one of the last ones on the list – No.21 was designated to me, and in those days you could only have 22 players. I went into a mini pre-season with the Dutch national team, and it went so well that the manager Guus Hiddink started me in the first match. I was a bit unlucky, it finished 0-0, but I’d come from Boavista, played one year at Leeds and then been called up for the national team straight away. Two years before that, when the Euros were in England, I went with friends to watch the Dutch national team, when England beat us 4-1. I was going to do the same in France, but I was called up myself, and my family came to watch me.”

Chelsea 4-0 Tottenham

March 13, 2002

Premier League

“My final game has to be when I scored a hat-trick for Chelsea against Spurs – left foot, right foot and a header. When I was told after the match that I’d scored a perfect hat-trick, I didn’t know what that was, I just thought a hat-trick was a hat-trick. That made it very special too. I think all the Spurs fans remember it, I always played really well against them for Chelsea, and also for Leeds – I used to find my best form against them and score [doing so 13 times]. There weren’t a lot of games that I lost against them in my career, and I must have played them maybe 20 times over 10 years, with Middlesbrough and Charlton as well. My lawyer is a big Spurs fan and he doesn’t like it when I speak about my record against them! [*Laughs*]”

Hasselbaink was speaking in association with Grosvenor Casinos

TAKE THAT After Domenico Toscano's Cesena beat Montevarchi Aquila in Serie C, opposing boss Roberto Malotti stormed out and chucked a bread roll at him

SIX OF THE MADDEST | MATCHDAY PROGRAMMES

1 MURDER MYSTERY

Interviews in matchday programmes can be pretty dull. Not at Newcastle, who came up with 'Tombola', whereby players would draw numbers out of a hat featuring 50 "fresh and far-reaching" posers to let chaos reign. Asked how he'd dispose of a dead body in an hour, Florian Lejeune embraced the format almost too well, Clive. "I'd put it in the boot of my car, drive out to sea, put it on a boat and throw it into the sea with weights on it," he explained, rather worryingly.

2 PEAK OF KNOWLEDGE

Oldham's former right-back Connor Brown probably would struggle to dispose of a body – he was still struggling with what day of the week it was. Taking on the club's assistant groundsman in a quiz in September 2014, Brown was asked to name Britain's highest mountain, but could only offer up the vague "Ben Mountain?" in response. We can see his logic – it starts with Ben, and it's a mountain, although the half a point he got for that answer was somewhat generous.

3 BUYING SPREE

When German-Cuban winger Onel Hernandez was asked whether he enjoyed living in Norwich in 2019, no-one expected his answer. "I love the city," he began. So far, so normal. "Next to me is a Morrisons, which is good," he continued. Bit weird, but OK. "Also, I'd never seen an Argos in my life. I walked inside, saw the catalogue with things you can order – bikes, TVs. Argos has everything, when I need something, I buy it from Argos!" Just wait until he discovers Amazon...

4 HIGH-STEAKS FIXTURE

Lincoln and Forest Green were promotion rivals in the National League in 2017 – when they met at Sincil Bank in League Two a year later, the Imps' programme had some rather unfortunate/possibly-accidentally-deliberate product placement. Next to the page profiling the famously vegan visiting club, came the headline 'Serious About Steak' and a massive picture of said meaty slab, as part of an advert for Marco-Pierre White's local restaurant. Oops.

5 DICTATING THE PLAY

When Crystal Palace asked Damien Delaney to choose five dinner guests in 2020, he went big. Just after the FA had condemned team-mate Wayne Hennessey's "lamentable degree of ignorance" about Adolf Hitler, Delaney opted for Joseph Stalin ("not because I'm a Stalinist, I'm not"), Genghis Khan ("his leadership and ferocity is unmatched"), Chairman Mao, Napoleon and... Rolling Stone Keith Richards. What's he going to do, teach Stalin to play the guitar?

6 UNLUCKY FOR SOME

Heaven forbid anyone would ever regard Massimo Cellino as irrational, but he did have a deep fear of the number 17. As Cagliari owner, he claimed they always lost when they played on the 17th, and changed seats numbered 17 to 16b. Then when he took over at Leeds, there were rumours he froze out Paddy Kenny because he was born on May 17. He also changed programme number 17 of the 2015-16 season to number 16b – Leeds hosted Forest, and lost.

ONE HIT WONDERS

SIPHIWE TSHABALALA

WHO?

Winger who wanted to be an accountant when he was a kid. Later accidentally emerges as the star of the Kaizer Chiefs – the South African club, not the homonymous band – and wins 49 international caps ahead of the opening game of the 2010 World Cup.

THE MOMENT

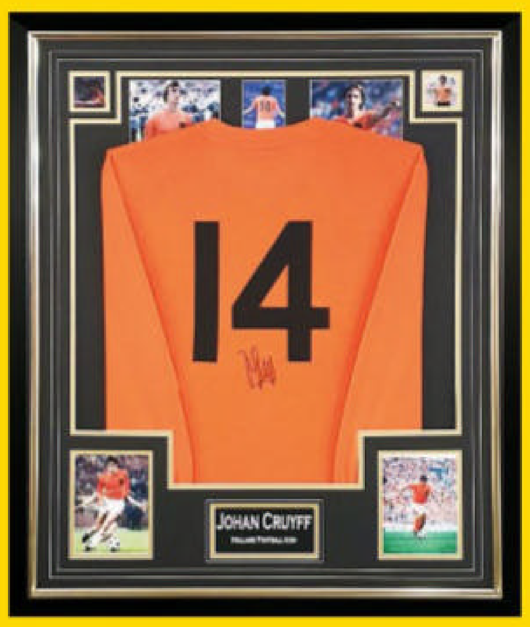
Directs a thunderbastard into the top corner to put the hosts ahead against Mexico, sending ITV's Peter Drury into orbit. "GOAL FOR SOUTH AFRICA, GOAL FOR ALL AFRICA!" he bellows, while viewers in Cairo and Marrakech tut at the sweeping generalisation. The Bafana Bafana are on for a famous victory.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Mexico equalise, South Africa lose 3-0 to Uruguay and become the first World Cup hosts ever to go out in the group stage. Tshabalala misses out on the Puskas Award to Hamit Altintop, and later heads to Turkey to join the catchily named Buyuksehir Belediye Erzurumspor in 2018-19, before returning home with AmaZulu after one season. Released last year, the 38-year-old insisted this summer that he still hadn't hung up his boots – Scottish lower-league clubs, sign him up. "GOAL FOR ALLOA, GOAL FOR ALL CLACKMANNANSHIRE!"

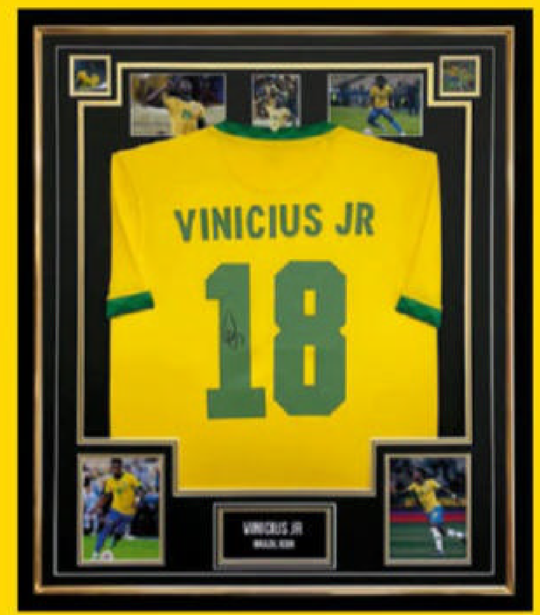
UP TO
JANUARY SALE
80% OFF

SIGNED FOOTBALL MEMORABILIA


14
JOHAN CRUYFF

RONALDO
7
CRISTIANO RONALDO
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNER 2018

DEL PIERO
10


VINICIUS JR
18
VINICIUS JR

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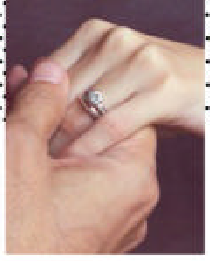

MIX-UP Smorgon's Vladislav Shubovich tried to propose at a Belarusian match but ended up scuffling after a steward shoved his partner away, thinking she was a pitch invader

"LEAVE HIM, ANTONIO, HE'S NOT WORTH IT!"

Liz Truss at Leeds? Stevie G at Scunthorpe? Look out: 2023 is going to be wild, starting with Conte's revenge

HAALAND 57 BLACKPOOL 0

Erling Haaland stands over the twitching corpse of Chris Maxwell, after maiming the Blackpool goalkeeper with a Mitre Delta. He's just bagged his 57th goal of this FA Cup tie, with seven minutes still to play. It's rumoured that the Norwegian spent the World Cup rigged up to a giant placenta beneath Stonehenge for a deep, regenerative sleep, finally re-emerging with an extra yard of pace and an even drier sense of humour, something nobody thought possible. Maxwell's eyeballs hang out of their sockets, his colon collapsed. "If he dies, he dies," mutters Haaland. There's no way to tell if he's joking.

LIZ TRUSS DOES A LEEDS

Having declared she would "channel the spirit of Don Revie" when she took over as Prime Minister, Yorkshire-raised Truss decided she'd rather channel the spirit of Brian Clough, announcing her departure after 44 days. When Jesse Marsch gets his Marsching orders, however, Truss lands her dream job: Leeds United manager. She and her assistant, Kwasi Kwarteng, inexplicably put every player on £400,000 per week (except new signing Seth Johnson, on £700k), then fail in a bid to raise cash by fracking the Elland Road pitch. The administrators are called in and Truss quits 44 minutes after being appointed.

NOTTINGHAM FOREST UNVEIL EVERYBODY

Having bought himself a BMX, Hungry Hippos, a Braun beard trimmer and a new ship for Christmas, Forest owner Evangelos Marinakis finds himself getting twitchy during that boring stretch between New Year's Day and the first FA Cup games, and swoops on 43 new members of staff, including Eduardo Camavinga, Teddy Sheringham, Steve Chettle, George Weah's cousin, Stuart Broad and the late Brian Clough, reanimated by AI technology. Results don't come immediately, so Marinakis extends Steve Cooper's contract until 2096, just to calm things down.

RONALDO ON A RAMPAGE

After insulting pretty much everyone at Manchester United before heading off to the World Cup, CR7 heads to pastures new in 2023 but struggles to find the 'off' button for Villain Mode. Having made the surprise move to renowned togetherness-touts Borussia Dortmund, Ronaldo chucks the PR script out of the window at his unveiling by labelling the manager 'absolut scheisse', calling Jude Bellingham a bellend, advocating the demolition of The Yellow Wall and then chinning the kit man. He finishes third in the Ballon d'Or voting.

STEVIE G HEADS TO GLANFORD PARK

Graeme Souness was Renoir with a razor blade as a player, but struggled to communicate his own merciless combination of ultra-violence and finesse as a gaffer. Bryan Robson could land a tennis ball on a sixpence from 60 yards with one foot and kick a rival's testes back inside him with the other, but ended up managing Thailand's under-23s. Will the same fate befall Steven Gerrard? In 2023, he sensibly turns down Everton's offer to become joint-boss with an ailing Frank Lampard but instead takes charge of Scunthorpe United. Things start badly yet Gerrard insists he'll turn things around, just as soon as they've beaten Olympiacos.

GRAHAM POTTER: TOP MODEL

What vitamins is this man taking? Like a fine wine or BBC newsreader Moira Stuart, Potter is ageing astonishingly well. Once a 6ft 1in journeyman with the equine face of a reliable pub-rock bass player, he is now parading Premier League touchlines with his salt-and-pepper beard, tight all-black ensembles, rich baritone and tactical flexibility. Naturally a modelling deal comes his way in 2023, completing his transformation into the Solihull George Clooney. Pass the Nespresso!

CONTE GOES DARK

"Where is Antonio?" asks Tottenham assistant manager Cristian Stellini as kick-off approaches against Chelsea on February 25. Conte is elsewhere. After his contretemps at Stamford Bridge in August, he had marked today in his diary as 'THOMAS TUCHEL – REVENGE' and he is determined to get it, even if Tuchel isn't Chelsea's manager any more. Conte is later found in a large shrub outside the German's house, frothing at the mouth, wearing antlers and in possession of night-vision equipment, a 15ft coil of rope and a Bowie knife. It transpires that Tuchel moved out five months earlier.

Nick Moore

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THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Have a go at these posers, featuring a footballer becoming a TV presenter and another becoming a film star

01 Southampton parted ways with gaffer Ralph Hasenhuttl (right) recently. Who was their last permanent boss before the Austrian?

02 Which former Aston Villa striker now presents BBC property show *Homes Under the Hammer*?

03 Which is the only Premier League club that began the current campaign without a shirt sponsor?

04 Ronaldinho joined Barcelona from which European outfit in the summer of 2003?

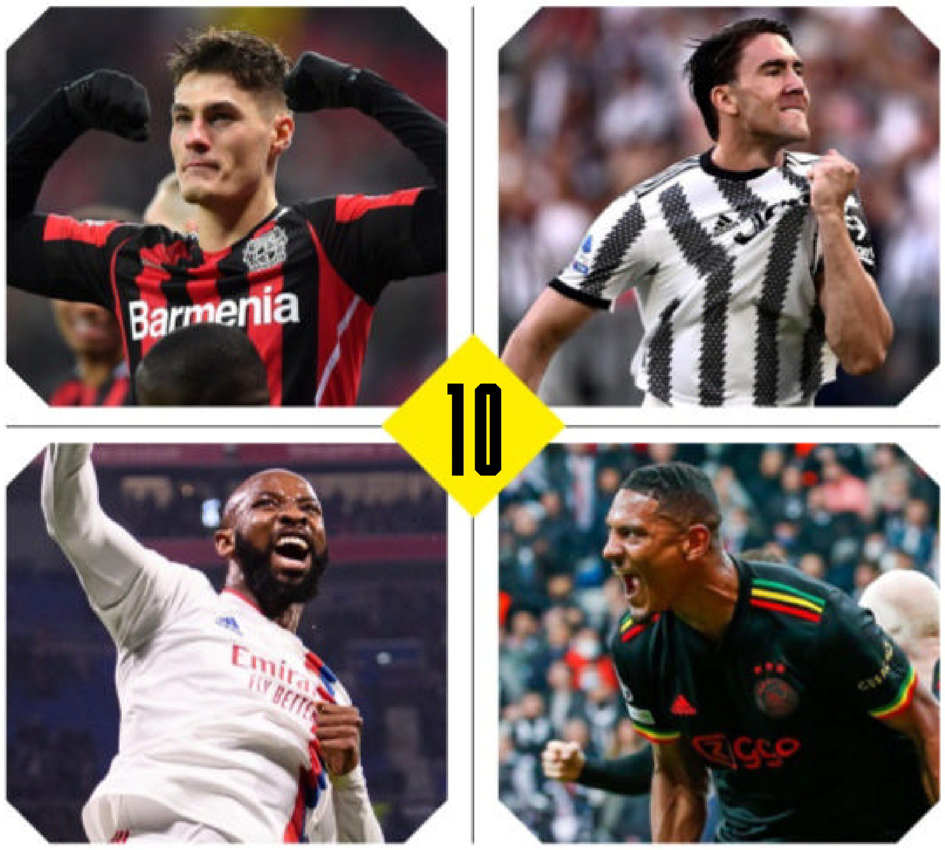
05 Which Spaniard won the 2022 Golden Boy award for the world's best young player?

06 Which League One side were the only London club to make it through to the fourth round of this season's League Cup?

07 Which former Rangers striker had a starring role in the 2000 film *A Shot at Glory*?

08 With which club did Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp begin his managerial career?

09 Chelsea wideman Callum Hudson-Odoi (below) is spending the current season on loan at which Bundesliga club?



These four players all hit at least 20 goals in their respective leagues during the 2021-22 season. Name them.

11 At which Lancashire club did David Beckham (above) spend time on loan in 1995?

12 Thiago Alcantara's brother made two appearances for Brazil. What's his name?

13 Which clubs defeated the following opponents in the Champions League final?

1993	Milan
1996	Ajax
2002	Bayer Leverkusen
2003	Juventus
2004	Monaco
2008	Chelsea
2011	Manchester United
2013	Borussia Dortmund

14 How many times has the new Aston Villa coach Unai Emery won the Europa League?

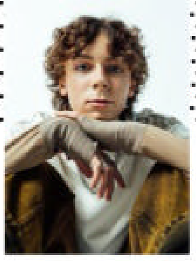
15 At £86m, who was the world's most expensive signing during the summer transfer window?

16 Which was the last team to win the English top flight prior to the Premier League launching?

17 David Unsworth was appointed as manager of which National League club in September?

18 Who won the Championship's player of the year honour at April's EFL awards ceremony?

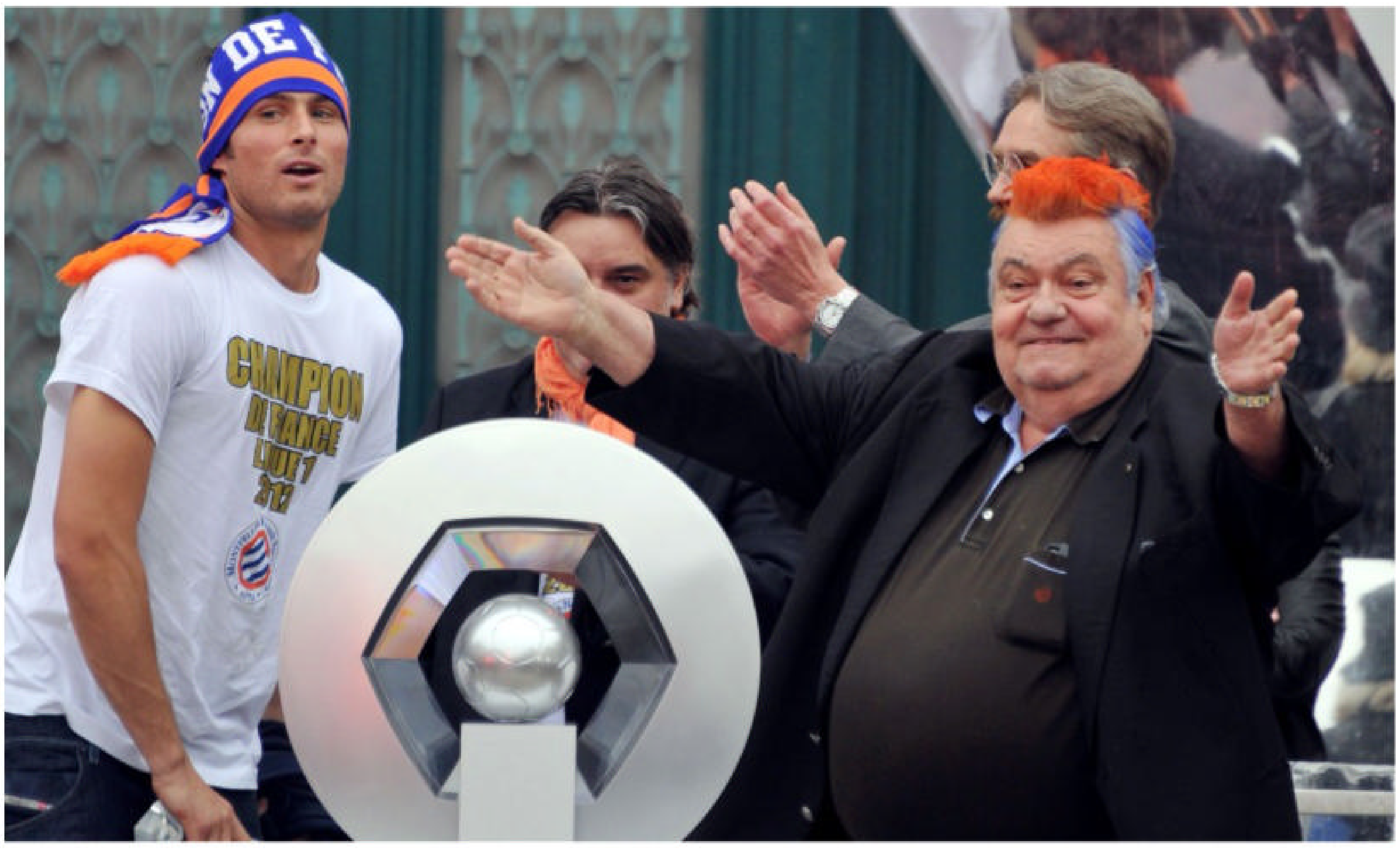
1. Mark Hughes **2.** Dion Dublin **3.** Nottingham Forest **4.** PSG **5.** Gavi **6.** Charlton **7.** Ally McCoist **8.** Mainz **9.** Bayer Leverkusen **10.** Patrik Schick, Dusan Vlahovic, Moussa Dembele, Sebastien Haller **11.** Preston **12.** Rafinha **13.** Marseille, Juventus, Real Madrid, Milan, Porto, Manchester United, Barcelona, Bayern Munich **14.** Four **15.** Antony **16.** Leeds **17.** Oldham **18.** Aleksandar Mitrovic



GOALIE WARS Mart Poom's son has entered a contest to represent Estonia at Eurovision – a year after Magnus Hedman's son failed in an attempt to sing for Sweden

THE CELLINO ZONE LOUIS NICOLLIN

The controversial Montpellier chairman liked a mohawk – but hated Newcastle



"He chose Newcastle? If so, he is an ass." Montpellier may seem like an unlikely club to hold a long-running grudge against the Magpies, but Louis Nicollin held that grudge nevertheless.

First he was irritated by Newcastle luring away defender Mapou Yanga-Mbiwa (they probably shouldn't have bothered), then he was angered when they wooed Remy Cabella (they *definitely* shouldn't have bothered). "He'll be bored s**tless in Newcastle," was Loulou's considered assessment.

It was nothing new for Nicollin, French football's most outspoken figure for more than 40 years until his death in 2017. The waste disposal magnate became La Paillade chairman in the amateur leagues in 1974, taking them into the top tier, then to the Ligue 1 title in 2012. "Montpellier, champions of France?" he said. "If I were Marseille, Paris, Lyon, Lille or Rennes, I'd stab myself in the arse with a sausage."

Nicollin promised to sport an orange-and-blue mohawk if they bagged the title, sticking to his word in celebrating alongside top goalscorer Olivier Giroud (above left). During that season, he also took aim at PSG boss Carlo Ancelotti. "I prefer [2008-09 promotion-winning boss Rolland] Courbis to Ancelotti – the greatest coaches are those who win titles with half-good players, Courbis went up to Ligue 1 coaching half-retarded players," he declared. Carlo must have raised an eyebrow.

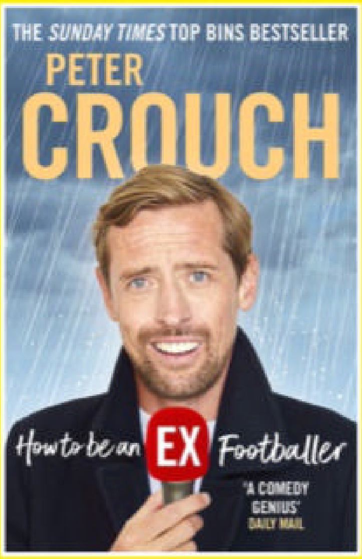
That July, he insulted Milan's follicly challenged CEO Adriano Galliani, too. "Kojak never called me," he bristled. The source of his ire? Interest in Yanga-Mbiwa, who he seemed to see as the reincarnation of Bobby Moore. Clubs insulted over the defender? Two. Titles delivered post-Montpellier? Er, none.

WHO ARE YA? | BATMAN PETROLSPOR

COULD BE The latest sequel to the Hollywood franchise – the pteropine superhero solves the global energy crisis by setting up his own petrol company in Gotham City. Take that, Putin.

ACTUALLY A Turkish third-tier side from the city of Batman, near a giant oil field. Play the Batman theme tune for goals, at least – maybe sign Baba(baba) Rahman to add to the fun. But no, they play *Freed From Desire* instead. Blame Will Grigg…

REQUIRED READING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PETER CROUCH
How to be an EX Footballer
'A COMEDY GENIUS' DAILY MAIL

HOW TO BE AN EX-FOOTBALLER

Peter Crouch
(Ebury, £20)
●●●●●

For every Peter Crouch, whose media career has flourished in retirement, there's a Paul Gascoigne who struggles to adapt to life once the money and adulation fades away. Life can be tough for, as Crouch puts it, a "general in the bling army suddenly demobbed".

The ex-England man's latest literary offering focuses on the pitfalls – and in Crouch's case – the opportunities that arise in retirement. His personal experiences are anecdote-rich, shown by a bizarre WhatsApp exchange with Vinnie Jones, who turns down Crouch's request for a podcast interview.

The former Spurs striker talks to a raft of former players – ex-Portsmouth defender Arjan de Zeeuw, now a narcotics detective in the Netherlands, and former Chelsea star Gavin Peacock, a pastor in North America among them – to argue ex-pros need to grab opportunities when they can. His various musings, including Tomas Brolin's career selling vacuum cleaner attachments, are never less than thoroughly entertaining and endearing.
Jon Spurling

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TRUE BLUE An adult company offered snubbed defender Fikayo Tomori a role as their World Cup commentator, in exchange for $250,000 and cam chats with their models

RUDI VOLLER vs FRANK RIJKAARD

THE TRIGGER

After the Dutch finish joint-second with the Republic of Ireland in their Italia 90 group, lots have to be drawn. The Irish win, so face (and beat) Romania in the last 16; the Netherlands lose, so run into bitter rivals (and eventual winners) West Germany. Only two years earlier, Ronald Koeman had mimed wiping his backside with a German shirt in their semi-final tie en route to Euro 88 glory, and when the sides met in World Cup qualifying, a Rotterdam flag compared Lothar Matthaus to Adolf Hitler. Sure.

THE FEUD

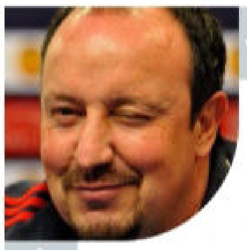
Playing at San Siro just a month after scoring the European Cup final winner for Milan, Rijkaard is carded for hacking down Voller midway through the first half. More than verbals are exchanged: Voller, also booked, tells anyone who'll listen that his perm's been grozzed in.

THE REVENGE

When Voller charges into a challenge with Dutch keeper Hans van Breukelen seconds later, Rijkaard grabs him by the ear and stamps on his foot. Amid the ensuing melée, both are sent off – and on their way off, Rijkaard wanders behind Voller and really goes for it this time, gobbing into the German's hair with all the phlegm that he can muster. In Senegal, a nine-year-old El-Hadji Diouf has a new hero.

THE OUTCOME

In Germany, Rijkaard instantly earns the nickname of 'The Llama' (because llamas love to spit, you see). He later apologises and, later still, the pair even wear matching dressing gowns to advertise butter together, making Gareth Southgate's Pizza Hut TV ad with Chris Waddle and Stuart Pearce seem perfectly normal by comparison. No real-life llamas, though, sadly.



WE'RE TALKING ABOUT FACTS | BRIGHTON'S RECORD DEFEAT

The Seagulls don't remember Christmas Day 1940 with much fondness. During the Second World War, Brighton travelled to Norwich with just four players; the rest were due to follow but never turned up. Local youths were drafted in to play alongside spectators pulled from the crowd. The result? 18-0. And not in Brighton's favour.

TROPHY CABINET

UEFA REGIONS' CUP

Fancy watching Jersey taking on Lazio? Or Latvia vs Lower Silesia? How about Republic of Ireland's clash with Prahova Muntenia?

All three have been match-ups in the 2023 UEFA Regions' Cup, which brings together amateur sides from each European country. Many hold a domestic competition to decide which region to put forward.

England are represented by the winners of the Inter-League Cup, such as North Riding, Mid-Cheshire or the Isle of Man. This year, Jersey faced Lazio (the region, not the club), North Macedonia (a country) and Bavaria, finishing third in their group. The Central Scottish League, meanwhile, lost 8-1 to Israel's Hapoel Bik'at HaYarden – a club, not a region. Make it make sense...

The Welsh and Northern Irish entrants both finished behind Zlin, a Czech region, while the Republic of Ireland just entered their entire country, which feels like cheating. They thundered through a group featuring South West Bulgaria, Romania's Prahova province and even San Marino. Yes, San Marino! Cue the Leonardo DiCaprio pointing meme. Can the Irish beat Belgrade, Galicia, Lisbon and the like to win the first Regions' Cup finals since 2019? Europe looks on transfixed – every nook and cranny of it.

INTERVIEW

LORENZO PELLEGRINI

Roma's captain talks Mourinho, Abraham, dinners with Chris Smalling and Italy's World Cup heartbreak

A World Cup is being played without Italy there. You featured during qualification, was that failure down to overconfidence after Euro 2020?
I don't think it was that. The Azzurri squad isn't a group that would be satisfied with themselves Before the Euros, there was definitely a feeling – a positivity that was almost strange, it was incredible. We all knew that we would do well. I'm not saying that it wasn't there any more afterwards, but it wasn't the same as before, and that was something you could feel. But we still went into the qualifiers with the correct mentality and approach. We weren't able to make a breakthrough in some of the matches that we drew, for example the two games against Switzerland. Ignoring the penalties we missed in those games, which can happen, we had so many chances to score, and just one victory would have been enough to reach Qatar. That's something that happens too often – we have a lot of chances and don't finish them. But I always saw an Italy side with a good attitude on the pitch.

You're Jose Mourinho's captain at Roma. What was it like when he was first appointed last year?
It was exciting, firstly because nobody expected it. Nobody knew anything. Even at the training ground, we found out practically at the exact moment Roma's social channels announced it. It was incredible, because he's a coach who has written the history of football, transformed the sport and still does everything to continue winning – it's something he instils in us every day. He's amazing. In the past year-and-a-half under Mourinho, I've had a new feeling. He manages to instil emotions inside you to release on the pitch. I'm honoured and proud to work with him.

How emotional a moment was it to captain your boyhood club to victory in the 2022 Europa Conference League Final, Roma's first European trophy for 61 years?
The whole run was very special – right from the start, we believed we could win it. We dedicated ourselves to it, and as we progressed, we realised how much we enjoyed the feeling that this competition was ours. Winning it was the realisation of a dream for me. I've always dreamed of lifting a trophy with this shirt, and last season was my first real year as captain. Being able to combine those two things in my first year as skipper – the first victory of my career and especially with this shirt, this armband – it was an indescribable emotion for me.

What did Mourinho say post-game?
He didn't want to go off to the press conference, he wanted to stay with us and continue the celebrations! But he had to go, it was mandatory. He went away and we all said to each other, "Let's go to the Mister with bottles of champagne and water while he's doing it." While he was talking into the microphone, we came running in and uncorked the Champagne and water on him! He decided to leave with us instead of doing the press conference, saying, "Let's go, let's go!" [*Laughs*]

The celebrations when you got back to Rome looked pretty special, with a bus parade past the Colosseum...
You could say that all of that passion stemmed from the fact that Roma hadn't won a trophy for so many years. But for me, that's not the case, because that ecstacy at winning the Europa Conference League – I see that every Sunday when we score, when we win a game. That's the passion of our supporters, which only exists here with Roma, and nowhere else. To be able to celebrate a cup, a goal, a win, and always with the same passion, is so unique. This is a really special club.

GOING OUT IN STYLE Gerard Pique has denied telling the ref, "I s**t on your prostitute mother" during his last game before retiring. "I didn't s**t on anyone's mother," he said

"WHILE JOSE WAS TALKING, WE CAME IN AND UNCORKED THE CHAMPAGNE ON HIM"

Tammy Abraham has become a key part of the Roma team since arriving last summer. How has he settled in?
Tammy is a great guy, very friendly. He was very courageous – at his age, having not always played at Chelsea but still doing well when he did, and after winning the Champions League, to leave and put himself to the test, to accept a new challenge. But right now, he can do a lot more. I've always said that with the right application, work, commitment and mentality, he can become one of the best strikers in the world. That maturation might need some time, just like the balance of the team. Tammy has incredible potential. Last season he produced impressive numbers. Besides being a great player, being with him in the dressing room is a pleasure - he's vital for our group.

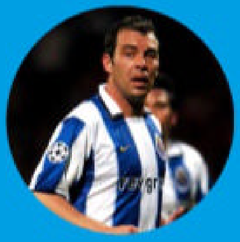
You also seem to have an excellent relationship with Chris Smalling – he keeps scoring from your free-kicks...
I asked him recently where he was going to take me out for dinner – this season I've already given him three assists! [*FFT*: so, three dinners?] We said three assists, one dinner. A top dinner, though! Chris is exceptional – so positive, great on and off the pitch.

What does he bring off the pitch to help the team?
He's a very quiet and calm person, but you feel he has the right character. That's something I like a lot – I don't like those who always speak loads to over-compensate. For me, those who have character and personality speak the right amount. He's one of them.

After Italy's World Cup play-off defeat, there was much debate about the lack of chances given to young players in Serie A. Do you have hope for the future of young Italian players?
It's very important to pay attention to the youth sector, like Roma do. Many people suggest there aren't any good young Italians, or that youngsters who come into the national team aren't ready or good enough, but I don't agree. I simply think we need to be able to make mistakes in peace. It's a bit like talking about children. One always tends to protect them, to say, "Don't do this, you'll get hurt." But until they do, they will never learn. It's so important to keep trying if you mess up, to try to have fun, to dare, to dribble, to not be afraid. Here in Italy, we have a bad habit of categorising a player or a person. If a player scores a crazy goal, they are a phenomenon. No! They scored a great goal, but they could be an average player. If a player makes one mistake, they aren't any good. No! Maybe they made a mistake but in reality, they are a phenomenon. We need to get rid of this mentality that Italians can have sometimes. We need to be more free to have fun. That way, we will return to the top again.
Alasdair Mackenzie

CAPTAIN, LEADER, LEGEND

Three other players have skippered a Jose Mourinho side to European glory – but, no, John Terry isn't among them

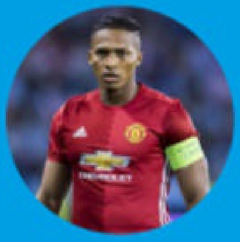


JORGE COSTA

The centre-back signed for Porto in his teens and was 31 by the time he helped them defeat Celtic in the 2003 UEFA Cup Final. A year later, he lifted the Champions League trophy after a 3-0 victory over Monaco. He's since gone on to manage sides as disparate as Braga, Mumbai City and Gabon.

JAVIER ZANETTI

The Argentine became an Inter legend during 19 years as a Nerazzurro – he was president Massimo Moratti's first signing back in 1995, and stayed on until the ripe old age of 40. In 2009-10, he played every single minute of their journey to Champions League glory, in Mourinho's final San Siro campaign.



ANTONIO VALENCIA

Club captain Wayne Rooney lifted the trophy when Manchester United won the Europa League in 2017, but he didn't start the final against Ajax as skipper. On his last appearance for the club, 31-year-old Wazza was a substitute. Ecuadorian full-back Valencia took the armband instead.

@FOURFOURTWO ASKS...

AS A SUPPORTER, WHICH PLAYER GOT ON YOUR NERVES?

Kevin Phillips – always scored against Wolves, whoever he was playing for.
Ryan Hillback

Cesar Azpilicueta. His incessant moaning, theatrics, fouling and shirt pulling. Oh, and his face.
@AdamETaylor

Sergio Rochet. Alkmaar conceded a lot of goals due to Sergio's f**k-ups.
@VinexVoetbal

David Speedie. I always knew he was a good player, and I like him now, but he was so niggly to play against. One you'd want on your side, though.
Steven Atkinson

As an Arsenal fan, the words "For f**k's sake, Giroud" became regular, specifically in the 2015-16 season. That should have been our title, had it not been for Giroud and Alexis Sanchez wasting so many goals.
@MarlonDeArmasP

Steve Sedgley. Led a player uprising during my time as Spurs boss on *Championship Manager 1993-94*, which led to our relegation.
@altgazza

346 SPINE LINE: "'February 2011, November 2014' are the only two times when Messi and Ronaldo have faced off during an international match," says Tony Fearon, via email. Correct! Cracked the Spine Line? For a chance to win an Art Of Football T-shirt or A4 print, enter on Twitter via #FFTSpineLine or email fourfourtwo@futurenet.com

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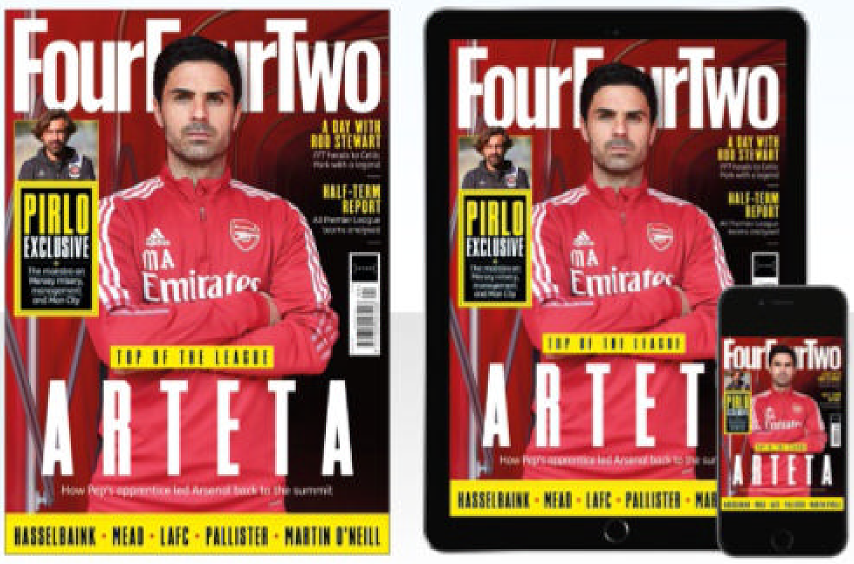

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In three years, Mikel Arteta's non-negotiables have taken the Gunners from a toxic crisis at his December 2019 arrival to five points clear on top of the Premier League. *FFT* speaks to players, coaches and fans to find out how the Basque did it

ARTistic ETiquette Arsenal

Words Mark White
Additional reporting Arthur Renard

When Pep Guardiola's name appears on your phone, you take the call. You stop what you are doing. He demands nothing less than your sole focus. It's as if he's put the rest of the world on mute for the duration he has your attention.

Mikel Arteta first met this hypnotic man many years earlier. He had grown up idolising this magician who could bend space, time and football to his will, long before the Catalan coaching *sensei* learned to choreograph whole teams to do the same. A 16-year-old Arteta would make his Barcelona B debut as a substitute for Guardiola, then-club captain and 11 years his protégé's senior. The former never made a senior Barcelona appearance but, with the pair both schooled by Johan Cruyff principles and with a contacts book in common, they kept in touch. And, a decade and a half later, Arteta received the call that would adjust his career's sails.

It was now April 2012. The days were getting longer and Arteta's first season wearing Arsenal red and white was drawing to a close. Guardiola wasn't ringing to offer his fellow La Masia alumnus a job – that was another conversation for another timeline. He had simply rung an old acquaintance to pick his brain about Chelsea, Barcelona's next opponents in the Champions League.

Arteta gave his two cents. He explained succinctly the strengths and weaknesses of an outfit he had recently helped Arsenal to humble 5-3 at Stamford Bridge. He had even set up Robin van Persie's injury-time hat-trick goal. Pep listened intently. "I must ask his opinion more often," he said as he hung up.

As compliments go, there are few bigger in the game than the most revered manager of a generation asking for a tactical take from an uncapped 30-year-old midfielder. It was an early endorsement of a football mind that Guardiola would mine on a regular basis.

"FIRSTLY, I'LL HAVE EVERYONE 120 PER CENT COMMITTED – IF NOT, YOU DON'T PLAY FOR ME"

"THAT WAS SO ARTETA"

Guardiola grew up fascinated by British football's romance and passion, admiring from afar its stacked pyramid, cup replays and travelling support. Arteta never had the luxury of distance. Unlike his playing and coaching mentor, he didn't leave his boyhood club of Barcelona on his own terms.

A gap year away at Paris Saint-Germain in 2001-02 – playing alongside Ronaldinho, Jay-Jay Okocha, Mauricio Pochettino and other big names – culminated in Barça spitting Arteta out to Rangers. He was just 20. The midfielder picked up English with a Glaswegian twang and learned a few choice swear words, as those who have seen *All or Nothing* can testify, before returning home to San Sebastian and Real Sociedad.

That didn't pan out, either. In the early summer of 2004, La Real planned to build their midfield around Arteta and Xabi Alonso – childhood friends and neighbours on Calle Matia, a short throw-in from the Playa de la Concha city-centre beach where they once honed their craft – but within six months the Basque pair were opposing generals in the Merseyside divide. By January 2005, Arteta was a Blue and Alonso was a Red.

A cultured midfield metronome, able to break defensive lines with his eyes closed, was forged in British football's fire. Arteta learned to fight at Ibrox, then Goodison, winning Evertonian hearts just as much for his spirit when tempers rose as for his dictating of the match tempo in calmer moments. After seven and a half seasons, and with his 30th birthday approaching, he wondered if he would ever get his big move. In August 2011, Arsene Wenger answered.

"The impact of his time at Arsenal cannot be measured in passing or possession stats," Spanish journalist Guillem Balague tells *FourFourTwo*. "His stability as a personality was what Wenger needed at the time. One of his first games was 0-0 at half-time and no one spoke. Wenger moved to a corner to let Arteta talk for him – that was so Arteta."

Arsenal signed Arteta and Per Mertesacker – not to mention Park Chu-young and Andre Santos – in a deadline-day scramble that followed their infamous 8-2 humiliation at the hands of Manchester United three days earlier. Arteta was a replacement for the recently-departed Cesc Fabregas, at least stylistically, but more importantly he was a roll of gaffer tape for Wenger to stretch

Clockwise from top When Rangers had Stephen Mangan in midfield; "Mikel, give us your Blue Steel"; winning the Toffees fans' hearts over the leadership void in his squad, with its average age a little over 24. Arteta and Mertesacker felt like short-term panic buys at the time but both would go on to retire at Arsenal, having been pillars on which Wenger relied. The Basque would eventually take the captaincy in 2014; Mertesacker took it next.

"Mikel was a great character, nice to work with and passionate about football," former team-mate Lukas Podolski recalls, beaming, to *FFT*. "He was exactly the same as now: he gave 100 per cent. He hasn't changed."

Arteta treated his responsibility as skipper with the utmost sincerity, too. He was closer to a number of the coaching staff than his own team-mates, became a regular in the video analyst suite to discuss upcoming opponents, and fellow players would call him "gaffer" or "teacher's pet". Arteta would host barbecues in his own garden, and even here, his searing eye for detail remained. No fatty meat allowed – the get-togethers focused on combining team ethic with recovery.

Towards the end of his playing career, Arteta would study for his coaching badges, working with Arsenal's Hale End youth teams and the Welsh national set-up to attain his UEFA A Licence. His path was clear, even to those he trained with every day.

"Mikel had decided he wanted to become a manager, and he prepared everything for that," says Podolski, now 37 and playing for boyhood club Gornik Zabrze. "I saw, on and off the pitch, that one day he would become a manager. He had that vision."

In May 2014, Arsenal's in-house magazine asked Arteta about his coaching future.

"I'll have absolutely everyone 120 per cent committed, that's the first thing," he said. "If not, you don't play for me. When it's time to work, it's time to work, and when it's time to have fun then I'm the first one to do it, but that commitment is vital. Then I want the football to be expressive, entertaining. I cannot have a concept of football where everything is based on the opposition."

Once again, Pep Guardiola – managing Bayern Munich by then – was impressed. In November 2015, the former Barça boys crossed paths after Arsenal lost 5-1 to Bayern in the Champions League group stage, with Pep suggesting they should work together if he ever left Bavaria for an English side. Little did Arteta know that his pal was already in talks to replace Manchester City boss Manuel Pellegrini the following summer.

Arteta couldn't turn down Arsenal when they approached him in the dying embers of 2011's summer transfer window, but he simply had to five years later, when Wenger asked him to run the academy. For a second time, a Guardiola phone call had changed his life. Arteta was a regular sounding board for the Catalan while also completing his UEFA Pro Licence on the same Welsh FA course as Patrick Vieira, Freddie Ljungberg, Thierry Henry and Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool assistant, Pep Lijnders. Arteta and Lijnders got on famously, bridging the brewing City-Liverpool, Guardiola-Klopp rivalry.

"I loved every second," Lijnders tells *FFT*. "Mikel and I were in the same position at ▸

that time, him assisting Pep, me assisting Jurgen. Curiosity and respect – so many similarities. I'm happy for his route, his success, despite being competitors. I want people I respect to do well.

"Except against us," he adds with a laugh.

ALL HAIL KING MIKEL

Arsenal considered handing a 36-year-old Arteta, still a Manchester City assistant, the keys to the club in the summer of 2018 as Arsene Wenger's successor. It would have broken the Premier League Richter scale.

As audacious as that was, Arteta had his admirers. He was adored at City, with Leroy Sané and Raheem Sterling publicly praising him after they cruised to a 100-point Premier League title. He talked the talk, had studied Guardiolaball up close, and he *got* Arsenal. It would have been akin to a popular backbencher assuming power. Instead, Unai Emery got the nod as the 'safe' appointment.

Emery was a horse for a Europa League course at a time when the competition was the Gunners' best shot at silverware and entry back into the Champions League. He was a square-peg coach, however, and, after 18 increasingly toxic months, the club again went fishing for another Basque boss.

"If Arteta had started managerial life away from City, it may have been a different path, but Guardiola's influence cannot be denied," Spanish football expert Balague tells *FFT*.

"He picked up a lot of how you relate to players – how *not* to relate to players, even. He learned from Pep, then added his own thing, which was influenced by his own playing career but also where he comes from.

"He comes from Gipuzkoa, one of the smallest provinces in the Basque Country, of just 700,000 people, and from there you've got Arteta, Emery, [new Wolves boss] Julen Lopetegui, Xabi Alonso... it's an unbelievable quarry of football-thinking talent. Every year the coaching federation gives 500 licences – to race to the top, you have to be very good."

Arsenal took the leap in December 2019 and appointed Arteta after all. If they were brave, he was bold, laying out his famous "non-negotiables" in his first interview and stating that the club had lost its way. Granit Xhaka came off the naughty step – and the transfer list – after twice telling some jeering Arsenal fans to "f**k off" at home to Crystal Palace two months earlier. Mesut Özil was reinstated as the creative hub, while record buy Nicolas Pepe was dropped for academy talent Reiss Nelson in Arteta's first game, a 1-1 draw at Bournemouth on Boxing Day.

Arsenal gradually improved, taking steps forward and back intermittently. Pablo Mari and Cedric Soares joined in January, while a teenage Bukayo Saka glittered on work experience at left-back. The skeleton of a team was beginning to knit together, as Arteta overloaded his side with fresh ideas.

"Mikel is about every small detail," Cedric tells *FFT*. "He always tries to prepare with a lot of detail. In every game, too. Picking games when he's not [detailed] is easier!"

In that first half-season, however, detail became the downfall. After COVID-19 forced the world into isolation from March 2020, the Gunners lost consecutive fixtures to Manchester City and Brighton away, comprehensively out-thought and out-fought in both games. Arteta realised that his ideals were too ambitious for this group of players. Rather than trying to ad-lib attacking moves, he switched to a back three and religiously rehearsed patterns of play. Lockdown in an empty Emirates Stadium was filled with the sound of Arteta barking instructions to his men, often in multiple languages, as he micromanaged their attacking patterns.

"He's on it," says Cedric, "but the rest is down to the players. If he's prepared every week with a game plan, we can't complain about not having enough information."

Clockwise from below One of the core lobes in Pep's massive football brain; look who's back; "This is called a Venn diagram"

BACK2BACK
PREMIER LEAGUE
Premier League

“MIKEL IS INCREDIBLY DETAILED IN EVERY GAME. PICKING GAMES WHEN HE’S NOT IS FAR EASIER!”

As the 2019-20 campaign finally drew to a close, Arsenal fans got their first glimpse of how good this coach could be when a red-and-white low block ground out wins against Liverpool in the league, then in the FA Cup against Manchester City and Chelsea – the latter in the final, on a silent, sunny August afternoon at Wembley. Game plans were executed exquisitely and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was the scalpel of the side’s military organisation. It was vindication.

“Knowing what had happened to Unai – and this was not much later – you realised there was something there,” remembers Balague of that FA Cup victory. “There was a lot of work needed but there was also a lot of improvement. Knowing that other big decisions were going to be taken, you were hopeful that the success could continue.”

Aubameyang was rewarded with a new contract and Willian joined from Chelsea on a free transfer, and then head of football Raul Sanllehi left north London before the 2020-21 season began. The ‘head coach’ sign on Arteta’s office door was replaced by the word ‘manager’ and, with Edu as technical director, Arteta bought defender Gabriel Magalhaes from Lille and midfielder Thomas Partey from Atletico Madrid.

The club’s post-Wenger structure had drifted towards a network of transfer experts, but now the manager was absolute monarch once more. Arteta had the final say and Arsenal essentially celebrated King Mikel’s coronation with his Wembley triumph.

His honeymoon, however, didn’t last long.

“YOU DESERVE BETTER”

Christmas came late in 2020. The Gunners were winless in seven league games and faced a Boxing Day encounter with Chelsea, Arteta’s recurring supervillains: his first home opponents, his cup final foes, and even the reason for Guardiola first asking his advice.

Willian wasn’t fit. In came the fledgling Emile Smith Rowe to address a dearth of creativity, with Saka on the right and the pugnacious Gabriel Martinelli on the left. It felt a little like the last roll of the dice; at least if Arteta were to fall on his sword, he’d do so sticking to his principles. At the very least, these young guns were prepared to give that 120 per cent commitment.

“When he first came to the club, I went on loan to Huddersfield,” Smith Rowe tells *FFT*. “He brought me into the office and said, ‘I want you to go and gain some experience for the first team – I want you to come back as a man’. He could see I was so shy.”

Smith Rowe was not a Hollywood No.10. Happy to hide under a floppy, blonde fringe, he shuffled awkwardly in the camera’s gaze – and that was exactly what Arsenal needed in their rut. The difference between him and Özil, frozen out and soon to have his contract terminated, was stark. The ‘Croydon De Bruyne’ drifted from side to side to create overloads and help his team-mates, rather than demand the spotlight.

A week earlier, Saka had tweeted: “You deserve more, Arsenal fans,” after a dismal draw against Southampton. Now, he was helping to seal three hard-earned points with a cheeky edge-of-the-area lob over Edouard Mendy in a 3-1 win – and Saka maintains to this day that he meant it. A new attitude was born, as Arteta’s Arsenal learned to play with expression and, most importantly, trust in the youngsters at their disposal.

“When I returned from my loan, I felt much more confident,” continues Smith Rowe. “Mikel pulled me in again and said, ‘You’ve come a long way’. He said that he was really happy with me. He’s just really good with young players: he speaks to us a lot, guides us and helps us individually. That’s what you want as a young player.”

Arsenal eventually stuttered and spluttered across the finish line in eighth place, with the 2020-21 season chalked down as a learning curve for all involved. For some supporters, the following campaign would be the first in ▶

THE FAN VIEW

***Arseblog*’s Tim Stillman calls what he sees in Arteta’s Arsenal (so far)**

I WAS FULLY BEHIND GIVING THE JOB TO A ROOKIE MANAGER

We’ve never really gone for the obvious manager choice: Chapman, Mee, Graham, Wenger. We’ve always had left-field appointments – that’s where Arsenal fit. Arteta really wanted this job and he was attainable. He shouldn’t be, by rights, but he feels like an Arsenal man.

ARTETA COULDN’T HAVE COMPLAINED IF HE HAD BEEN SACKED

I don’t think we were always on this path. Arteta made mistakes along the way – Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang’s renewed contract, Willian joining, and perhaps he could have managed Nicolas Pepe better – but there was no one on the market we could get who could obviously do any better. The phrase I always use is that he couldn’t have complained if he had been sacked. That second half of the 2020-21 season, when Martin Odegaard came in and Emith Smith Rowe started playing, gave us a better idea of the football that Arteta was trying to play.

THE SUMMER OF 2021 CONVINCED ME THAT THERE MUST HAVE BEEN A PLAN

I was very interested in our so-called ‘underwhelming’ signings. Some Arsenal fans were genuinely upset about Aaron Ramsdale, quoting his long-ball statistics – the same with Ben White – and I was thinking, ‘Surely that’s the point, though?’ It couldn’t just have been an accident. I thought, ‘All right, he’s seen something in these players and I want to see what it is’. Our win against Burnley in September last year was the one: we played very differently, with Thomas Partey set up as the deepest midfielder. I was convinced quite quickly after that.

ARSENAL ARE IN A TITLE RACE

Arsenal are in a no-lose situation. It’s easy to compartmentalise if we lose to Manchester City: it’s not like last season, competing against Spurs. Every six or seven years, though, a window opens for a title win when everyone is in transition. There is another part of me that thinks if we don’t do it this season, we won’t have another opportunity for a long time…

living memory without European football, as a young squad learned on the job alongside their manager. However, Balague doesn't believe that the Arsenal board were ever close to pulling the plug on Arteta.

"You just have to go by what you hear," he explains. "Things take time and they were willing to wait. I didn't see any indication they were looking anywhere else; you know if a big club like Arsenal are going for a big manager like Lopetegui or Luis Enrique. Manchester United spoke to both, for instance. But there were no calls to vacant managers – nothing. They backed him, big time."

Arsenal doubled down on the manager's ideals, turning Martin Odegaard's loan spell permanent with an eye to making Real Madrid's playmaker the prototypical Arteta footballer: young, deft, clever on the ball and in space, and someone for team-mates to look up to. The Norwegian received the No.8 shirt and was told by his new manager, the shirt's former owner, to take care of it.

"Every day, I'm learning something new," Odegaard tells *FFT* of life under Arteta. "There are so many details – body position, how to control the ball – and it helps us to improve. He's not just telling everyone what to do; he's teaching us why. It helps the team to understand and to improve."

Odegaard became the nucleus in the centre of the pitch. Aaron Ramsdale, fresh from double-relegation at Bournemouth and Sheffield United, arrived in goal to much keyboard-warrior furore, with Poole pal Ben White a £50 million centre-back signing from Brighton. Little-known Albert Sambi Lokonga and Nuno Tavares joined the Londoners, too, as midfield and left-back cover respectively, and ambipedal Japanese international Takehiro Tomiyasu completed the overhaul.

Then came the club's worst start in Premier League history. Arteta's second full season in charge opened with an infamous string of back-to-back-to-back defeats: after Brentford bullied the Gunners on opening night, insipid losses to Chelsea and Manchester City rooted a shell-shocked young side to the foot of the table. Again, Arteta's position came under threat. Again, the board backed their man.

"The most interesting thing is that the board has given him time," Podolski tells *FFT*. "Everyone was saying, 'We have to change the manager. Why did they bring him in?' But he trusts in the process. Everyone works for one goal and now you can see what good scouting, transfers and decisions can do. When you trust in the process and everyone works together, then anything is possible."

Coaching buddy Lijnders agrees. "He is transforming the club," he says. "There isn't a bigger compliment in football."

A VISION APPEARS

Arsene Wenger hasn't been back since his retirement in 2018, neither to the training

MIKEL'S GENERALS

We name five key players in Arteta's three-year Arsenal tenure – some less obvious than others

GRANIT XHAKA

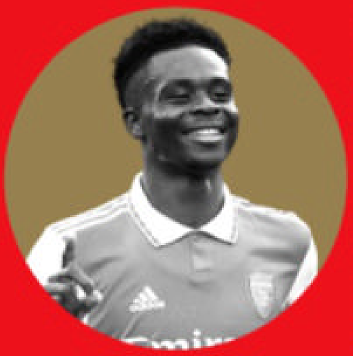
In his first week on the job, Arteta convinced Xhaka to stay; ever since, the Swiss midfielder has been loyal to his manager and fulfilled every kind of tactical tweak, dropping into the backline, moving to left-back and becoming box-to-box. Finally, he is receiving his plaudits.

ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

The manager's friction with Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang was well-documented, but Laca quietly went about his job up front, working tirelessly, to become a leader. He might not have had Auba's spark, but his professionalism will be remembered fondly by Arteta.

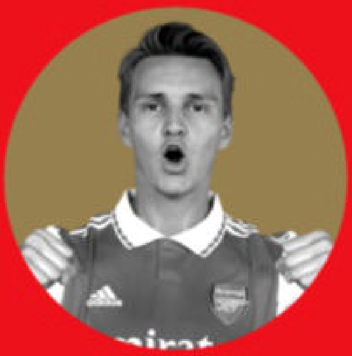
ROB HOLDING

The assembled hordes of Genghis Khan couldn't breach Arsenal's defence with sub Holding as a fifth defender. Another amiable leader, the Bolton Baresi is invaluable for shoring up 1-0 leads and setting the bar as Arteta's most selfless team player – all in brief 15-minute bursts.



BUKAYO SAKA

Saka began under Arteta as a makeshift left-back and went into the World Cup as one of the planet's best right-wingers. The starlet is virtually an ever-present, and his decision-making and maturity are the bedrock of everything Arteta wanted to build around in his attack.



MARTIN ODEGAARD

Just a year after signing for Arsenal permanently, the Norwegian could cite Arteta as his longest-serving boss. The wonderkid-turned-captain has settled down from years of development on loan, crystallising into a rounded midfielder and the heartbeat of this brave new Arsenal.

Clockwise from top "We're all winners here"; Ramsdale has shone for Arteta; "And this is how you work a string puppet"; beating Chelsea away in November: nice

> "ARSENAL TOLD ARTETA THAT, WHATEVER HE DECIDED, THEY WOULD BACK HIS BIG DECISIONS"

ground nor the stadium he helped to design. It's for the best, in many ways, that a ghost of such honeyed nostalgia refuses to linger in Arsenal's marble halls, presiding over teenagers who will make mistakes as well as memories. Nonetheless, the current crop do high-five the Frenchman every day in training.

An eventful year on from the miserable, behind-closed-doors autumn of 2020, when Arteta clung to the wheel like a ship captain lost in a sea storm, the Gunners boss asked for a Wenger mural to be installed at Colney: an image of his former mentor, raising one hand, for Arsenal players to tap on their way past. It felt fitting that as this new team began expressing themselves on the pitch, while the club culture was revolutionised from *laissez-faire* to labour-intensive, players should be reminded of the legends who have preceded them.

Arteta's vision started to appear from the haze of that catastrophic opening. His team went eight league games unbeaten, playing bravely and expansively, as the manager looked for new ways to motivate a young team. For example, before a trip to Liverpool – albeit one that ended with a 4-0 defeat – Arteta notoriously pumped *You'll Never Walk Alone* onto the training pitch to simulate Anfield's unique atmosphere for his players.

"We were all a little bit confused when we could hear the music on... then we saw the speakers," Odegaard laughs now. "Anfield can be the loudest stadium in this country. It was a nice way to prepare the team.

"But Mikel is very creative. He will always do what it takes to prepare the team as well as possible. It's always interesting to be in a meeting with him: you can learn things, pick up new things, and there's so many details in the game he will teach you. It's nice to learn so much about football."

Arteta drafted in a coaching team, too, who would all take responsibility to talk to these burgeoning young men on a personal level as well as a footballing one. Mental health, self-confidence and settling in a foreign land were all topics brought to work. The gaffer dedicated his Manager of the Month award for September 2021 to the coaching staff by his side, in recognition of their efforts.

"As a young man, it's difficult to open up to someone you don't know that well," Smith Rowe says of Carlos Cuesta, Arteta's youngest coach at just 27. "But it was good to speak with him. He's someone I got along with straight away when I first met him.

"I don't know what it was that made me open up, but I thought, 'Let's see how it goes'. It's not only me he has helped; he's helped other players and it's good to have someone like that, knowing you can go to them. Not just him, either: you can go to the manager, the assistant – you can speak to anyone."

Fittingly for a young team, Arsenal found themselves flitting between brilliant and bumbling as the season wore on. There was no in-between: they drew just three Premier League games throughout 2021-22, the fewest in the division. This bunch would either tear opponents apart like laser-guided Red Arrows, displaying imagination, passion and fluidity of movement, or they would look like lost souls in a departure lounge, frozen by fear, waiting for an announcement to inform them of their gate. They could give you life, they could take it away – sometimes in the same half of football.

The older heads weren't exactly helping. For all of his selfless industry, Alexandre Lacazette would register two non-penalty goals all campaign, while in January 2022, Aubameyang's deal was terminated after one too many training no-shows. Arteta's "non-negotiables" had been compromised. Some questioned the harshness of this stance with his captain, while others were again furious, 12 months on from Özil's exit, with a supposed leader.

"He'd seen it before under Guardiola and in his playing career – you have to be brave," Balague tells *FFT*. "The club told him that whatever he decided, they would back him up, and big decisions were taken."

The bravery wasn't just in letting Auba leave, but in choosing not to strengthen up front, essentially leaving Arteta utterly unarmed against critics if his inexperienced team should fail to finish in the top four.

Narrative dictated that it had to be Spurs who pipped Arsenal to the final Champions League spot. A spectacular spring collapse, including four losses in five from mid-March, preceded a mini-revival for Arteta's men, but that was ended by back-to-back defeats at ▶

Newcastle and Tottenham in May. Pundits theorised that Arsenal would get few better chances. The youngsters begged to differ.

"Our mentality is our best quality," Gabriel Martinelli tells *FFT*. "We have a young team, but age is not everything, and our mentality is amazing. We go into every game with the same mentality to win."

The bruises healed quicker than expected.

"THIS IS OUR FAMILY"

Arteta often talks about suffering. He has certainly suffered for the career he has built. Serious knee injuries ruined his chance of playing for Spain when he was on the brink of a call-up – he almost defected to England – while the biggest regret of his playing days is that he was too cerebral to properly enjoy them. From the dugout, he'll tell players they must be prepared to suffer without the ball and embrace the hard slog as motivation.

Arsenal *have* suffered in recent years, not least without a top striker, especially when heading into Champions League races opposite one-time Gunners youth-teamer Harry Kane. Arteta waited patiently for the right man and this summer Gabriel Jesus arrived, closing a circle from the manager's Manchester City days. Arteta's chosen No.9 was never going to have Kane's precision – few do – but he drives, he drifts, he dribbles and, ultimately, he runs. And that's enough.

His goal return is decent but unspectacular: five by the mid-season break, albeit from a total xG of 9.38, representing the Premier League's largest underperformance by any player and continuing a trend from his Etihad Stadium days. Yet fans love him, because he burns himself into the ground for the cause.

"Everyone can see the team's spirit," says the Brazilian, smiling when *FFT* posits that Arteta, a demanding whipcracker, would prefer his work rate over his ability. "You can see the way we love each other, the way we want to help each other on the pitch."

Indeed, fellow Brazilian Martinelli saw the introduction of a new striker as an aid to him rather than an obstacle. "I see myself more as a left-winger but I can play on the right as well, or as a striker," he insists to *FFT*. "I love to play with Jesus because he loves moving.

"He goes to the left, I can move central. It's very good to have that movement and it helps the team as well."

Jesus agrees. "This is our family and this is why it works so well," he says. "I spend more time here than at home. Absolutely everyone here is like this."

Jesus wasn't the only summer bargain that Arteta picked up from his former club. Left-back Oleksandr Zinchenko has been instrumental to Arsenal's evolution this season. The coach demands the Ukrainian and right-back White slide inside when the Gunners have the ball to form a midfield three either side of Partey, which in turn protects centre-backs Gabriel and William Saliba from counter-attacks. Providing a shape which keeps the opposition under constant pressure, this back five also supplements a fluid attacking five of Martinelli, Xhaka, Jesus, Odegaard and Saka. A rejuvenated Xhaka has licence to maraud as a de facto inside-forward from the left, and by November he had had equalled his best goalscoring season in an Arsenal shirt.

This feels more like a finished team than it ever has under Arteta, and not just the bones of something for the future. Top of the table 14 games into a season, five points clear of Manchester City having dropped just four from a possible 42, is a nice place to be – with or without a winter World Cup as distraction.

Six years on from Pep Guardiola asking Mikel Arteta to work with him – plus another four from that fateful phone call when the master realised the apprentice's tactical nous – are the pair embroiled in a title race?

"It's great to be where we are," Arteta smiled coyly before the break. "We have to reflect on what we are doing, and be very much prepared for what is going to come. I can say that it has been phenomenal to work with these players and staff."

It's been some journey. And there's no need to merely *trust* this process any more. Arteta's vision is there for all to see.

"EVERYONE CAN SEE THE TEAM'S SPIRIT AND HOW WE WANT TO HELP EACH OTHER"

Below "I turned Haaland down, Gabi, I promise" **Bottom** Jesus is a leader for Arteta's Gunners

HOPE
AND
HOMES
FOR
CHILDREN

URGENT APPEAL

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

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PREMIER LEAGUE HALF-TERM

Fan Reports

Missing your weekly fix of pure, unadulterated Barclays? From wedding speech fails to ungraded managerial tenures, fans from each team give *FourFourTwo* the lay of the land as we negotiate the domestic breather...

ARSENAL

Grade your manager A*. Super Mik Arteta [above] has been near-flawless – precisely what we hoped for when we appointed Pep Guardiola's No.2.
Star man The Swiss Frank Lampard himself, Granit Xhaka. The clumsy duckling has become a wonderful swan, already equalling his best goalscoring return for a season and earning a chant from the fans (albeit a poor imitation to William Saliba's).
Biggest disappointment That Albert Sambi Lokonga and Eddie Nketiah aren't raring for first-team places, with our rather ropey Europa League adventures proving annoyingly dull. But when you're top by five points, any serious criticism is a nitpick.
WTF moment of the season We conceded the inevitable equaliser to Southampton in October because Aaron Ramsdale appeared to be distracted by a pigeon in his six-yard box. No, really. Watch it for yourself.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Nothing. Please, football gods, more of the same. Just *imagine*...
@markwhlte

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ASTON VILLA

Grade your manager A. It's early days, but first impressions of Unai Emery [above] have been really positive. Great track record, humble, enthusiastic and tactically astute. The less said about Steven Gerrard, meanwhile, the better...
Star man Ashley Young. Whether it's starting or coming off the bench, the 37-year-old's been key. His attitude is an example to all. And he scored a banger against Nottingham Forest.
Biggest disappointment Villa had approached this year with hopes of qualifying for European competition, only for it to disintegrate with a series of woeful performances taking us towards the bottom of the league.
WTF moment of the season The way Tyrone Mings was stripped of the captaincy just before the opening match of the season. Bizarre.
One thing you'd change for 2023 More games like Emery's first one in charge: a 3-1 destruction of Manchester United, for our first home win over them for 27 years.
Phil Gennoy

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AFC BOURNEMOUTH

Grade your manager(s) Scott Parker complained his own team were s**t until they had no choice but to sack him, so he gets a U: did not finish. As interim, Gary O'Neil gets a B, shoring us up defensively and getting a clean sheet four days after losing 9-0.
Star man For attacking returns, it's Philip Billing, and Lewis Cook has been outstanding in midfield, but I'm tempted to give it to Chris Mepham. The centre-back has barely played in the past few seasons, but he's been so solid and proved plenty wrong.
Biggest disappointment Losing 9-0, isn't it? That was something we had over Southampton, but now we don't even have that. Thanks, Scott.
WTF moment of the season Losing two consecutive two-goal leads, to Spurs and Leeds. The third time we went 2-0 up, against Everton, we were all very stressed, but won 3-0.
One thing you'd change for 2023 It'd probably would be a good idea to hire a permanent manager and stop throwing away two-goal leads.
Charlotte Marchant-Jones

HOLLYWOOD
bets

BRENTFORD

Grade your manager B+. The urbane Dane, Thomas Frank, continues to do a sterling job. His tactics were the foundation for astonishing victories against both Manchester clubs and we're happy to be 10th. Our dodgy away form – notwithstanding the City success – needs sorting, though. That immense result at Eastlands was our only three-point haul on the road.
Star man Mathias Jensen, Ben Mee and Rico Henry have been excellent, but I can't not pick Ivan Toney [above] – 10 league goals and so much good play to go with them. If he's banned following his FA charge for betting, he'll be sorely missed.
Biggest disappointment Fulham's late winner against us wasn't ideal.
WTF moment of the season After 35 minutes, Brentford 4-0 Manchester United – I was crying with laughter.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Christian Norgaard's terrible luck with injuries. I'll also sneak in a plea from my sister: some burger sauce in the North Stand, please.
@WillGore

BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION

Grade your manager(s) Graham Potter: A on the pitch and F- off it. Roberto De Zerbi: B+. We will have to wait and see how he manages the risk/reward of the attacking system he wants to play. The 4-1 defeat of Potter's Chelsea is the benchmark.
Star man Leandro Trossard [above], who's gone from strength to strength and shows no sign of stopping! Moises Caicedo and Kaoru Mitoma deserve mentions for exciting starts.
Biggest disappointment Potter jumping ship and taking the entire backroom staff with him. It was also devastating for Enock Mwepu to be forced into retirement, aged just 24, just as he was establishing himself.
WTF moment of the season Scoring two goal-of-the-season contenders – Alexis Mac Allister against Leicester and Trossard against Aston Villa – and having both of them chalked off.
One thing you'd change for 2023 More of the same going forward, but maybe a bit more of the old Brighton stinginess further back...
@TheMattBarker

CHELSEA

Grade your manager(s) D for Thomas Tuchel. He didn't go because of results; the situation between him and the owners seemed untenable. We're told Graham Potter [above] is a long-term appointment but, with a string of awful results already, will that turn out to be true? C.
Star man Reece James was by far our best player. Injury scuppered his World Cup prospects as well as Chelsea's chances of being any good.
Biggest disappointment Kalidou Koulibaly has been touted for a big Premier League move for the best part of a decade... we might be seeing why it took so long to happen.
WTF moment of the season Tuchel's results were absolutely appalling, but Chelsea never fail to shock and amaze with managerial changes.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Just one? Well, the club buying a first new central midfielder since 2018 would be a start. N'Golo Kante is showing signs of age. Mason Mount and Mateo Kovacic can't do it all.
@Chelsearory

CRYSTAL PALACE

Grade your manager B. Patrick Vieira was such a good appointment. Four comeback wins already this season show the fight he's instilled.
Star man Cheick Doucoure. He's hard-tackling and confident on the ball; the only concern is he's having to do two people's work to allow more attacking-minded players to play higher up. Honourable mention to centre-back Joachim Andersen.
Biggest disappointment No Palace player made England's World Cup squad. Marc Guehi can consider himself incredibly unfortunate and perhaps it's a tournament too soon for Eberechi Eze and Tyrick Mitchell.
WTF moment of the season Conor Gallagher scoring his first Chelsea goal at Selhurst Park was sore, and predicted by almost every Eagle.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Wilfried Zaha [above] signing a new Palace contract to keep him at the club beyond the summer. No Palace fan would begrudge him a big move away, but if he leaves it'll hurt. A lot.
@Jackpierce88

EVERTON

Grade your manager C-. All year, it has been one step forward, two steps back. Frank Lampard [above] speaks brilliantly and 'gets' Everton, but any positives have been undone by some rubbish performances and results.
Star man Alex Iwobi. His renaissance from last season has continued into this one and he's now a proper No 8, with five assists in 2022-23. He's one of the first names on the team-sheet.
Biggest disappointment The entire attack. The team is crying out for goals, and with a bit more threat, some of our five draws would have been the wins we desperately need.
WTF moment of the season After a 4-1 League Cup thrashing away at Bournemouth in November, losing 3-0 to the same opponents at the same ground four days later. Awful.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Sign some more forwards in January: a proper No.9 to compete with – or replace – Dominic Calvert-Lewin, and at least one winger who knows where the back of the net is.
@joe_strange

FULHAM

Grade your manager A-. Unlike the past few attempts at the Premier League under different managers, Marco Silva's Fulham finally look like they have what it takes to stay up.

Star man Midfielder Joao Palhinha [above] has been one of the signings of the summer. He gets to places water can't.

Biggest disappointment Conceding late goals. Stoppage-time winners for Manchester City and Manchester United in our two games preceding the break were a kick in the teeth.

WTF moment of the season Harrison Reed transforming himself into a goalscoring midfielder. He'd scored no goals for the club in three seasons, but has managed to notch twice this term already.

One thing you'd change for 2023 Buy a back-up striker. Aleksandar Mitrovic was playing with an injury since the autumn international break – goalscoring cover could be needed. And some improved facilities in the Hammersmith End, please.

@JamesAndrew_

LEEDS UNITED

Grade your manager C-. Still not fully convinced. Jesse Marsch [above] had two decent wins recently, but the style of play is a consistent concern. Leeds are too easy to score against.

Star man Tyler Adams. Even though I write this after a red card that will keep him out of the first game back, against Manchester City, he's a born leader; a true winner. When Leeds recruited him from RB Leipzig, few expected the level he's delivered.

Biggest disappointment Leeds' fixtures have been kind, but losing to Fulham, Crystal Palace, Leicester and Brentford hasn't been ideal.

WTF moment of the season The Top Six bias – controversial but true. Arsenal got the luck of the draw against Leeds as a Patrick Bamford goal was wrongly ruled out, while another came in the 4-3 defeat to Spurs – a blatant push on Illan Meslier, not given. Very much WTF.

One thing you'd change for 2023 More points and some sexy football, please. It's very tight in mid-table.

@ConorMcGilligxn

LEICESTER CITY

Grade your manager C. Most clubs would have sacked Brendan Rodgers, but our owners kept the faith. He hasn't won back everyone's affections yet, though, and we have some tricky games coming up after the restart.

Star man We all sing about Youri Tielemans being our star man, but James Maddison [above] has outshone even our brilliant Belgian.

Biggest disappointment *That* start – one point in seven games – but losing leads at home to both Brentford and Southampton in particular. We looked mentally weak and you wondered where the first win was coming from. Nottingham Forest, as it happened.

WTF moment of season Shipping five at Brighton, then six at Spurs. But WTF could stand for Wout 'Turnaround' Faes, whose signing has seemingly kick-started our season.

One thing you'd change for 2023 The contract situations of Tielemans and Maddison. If they're not going to sign new deals, we need to be ultra-savvy in the winter market.

@TheFosseWay

LIVERPOOL

Grade your manager B. He's still the best manager in the world and the injuries haven't helped him, but Jurgen Klopp [above, left] hasn't got things spot on as he usually would – he's been workshopping as he goes.

Star man Alisson [above, right]. What a man. He is a goalkeeper operating at the peak of his powers during a difficult period for the club.

Biggest disappointment Beating Manchester City 1-0 and then going on to lose to Nottingham Forest and Leeds. Where's the consistency?

WTF moment of the season Signing Juventus and Brazil's Arthur Melo on deadline day, then watching him for play for the under-21s at Rochdale and teleport back to the treatment room for the foreseeable future.

One thing you'd change for 2023 Our record against Real Madrid. We are now without a win against them in four meetings under Klopp and they're standing between us and the Champions League quarter-finals. It's time for revenge.

@LusbyJack

MANCHESTER CITY

Grade your manager Pep Guardiola still overthinks big games. Kevin De Bruyne on the right wing at Liverpool meant Phil Foden couldn't exploit a 36-year-old James Milner. Still an A.
Star man Who else? When we played Nottingham Forest, the groom at the wedding I was at (a United fan) was slagging off City in his speech. Erling Haaland [above] scored twice while he was delivering it, and a third by the time the best man stepped up.
Biggest disappointment The home defeat against Brentford. Not only did most of our rivals win too, but it was the last game before the World Cup, leaving us to stew on it for a month.
WTF moment of the season Three home hat-tricks in a row for Haaland. Maybe the Premier League is the 'farmers league', eh? It's reached the point where I'm almost disappointed when he only scores once.
One thing you'd change for 2023 The sloppy defending. Pep's constant is Joao Cancelo, but he's chopped and changed every other position.
@alexhorlock

MANCHESTER UNITED

Grade your manager B. Take away the drubbings by Brentford and Manchester City and it appears as if we're on the right path under Erik ten Hag. Wins over Liverpool, Arsenal and Spurs show this is the beginnings of a squad which could compete.
Star man Lisandro Martinez: what a great signing! Many in the media predicted he'd fail (Jamie Carragher, we're looking at you), but he's had a galvanising effect on the defence.
Biggest disappointment Cristiano Ronaldo [above] – we all know why...
WTF moment of the season Alejandro Garnacho's stoppage-time winner against Fulham. We love a youngster breaking into the squad and this boy looks the real deal. The goal was way ahead of his 18 years and gave us our first 'jump-out-your-seat' moment of the campaign.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Consistency. This squad remains capable of pulling a 3-1 defeat at Aston Villa out of the bag when it matters most. Infuriating.
@jamie_ward84

NEWCASTLE UNITED

Grade your manager A*. Eddie Howe is defying expectations, but keeps calm while the rest of us are going absolutely f**king mental.
Star man Clear tactics and proper coaching have turned Miggy Almiron [above] into one of the league's most lethal forwards. Just about everyone else had given up on him fulfilling his potential in England – especially Jack Grealish...
Biggest disappointment Injury to our club-record signing Alexander Isak. The 23-year-old Swede hit two in three, but a thigh injury has kept him out since mid-September. Isak, Allan Saint-Maximin, Callum Wilson and Almiron will be quite an arsenal to choose from after the World Cup.
WTF moment of the season Being 3-1 up at home to Manchester City after an hour on matchday three.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Better luck with VAR. We had a goal controversially ruled out that would have put us 2-0 up at Anfield. We lost in the 98th minute – our only defeat.
@Ketchell

NOTTINGHAM FOREST

Grade your manager Solid C. It couldn't be lower after last season's success, but Steve Cooper [above] hasn't set the world alight despite spending over £150m. Even so, he's the best thing to happen to us for years. In Cooper we trust.
Star man The starting line-up has been different every week, but Dean Henderson in goal has won us points on his own. I heard a rumour that he doesn't concede penalties. This may or may not be true. *[It definitely isn't true – Ed.]*
Biggest disappointment Our boy J-Lingz. No goals or assists in the league for Jesse Lingard, who is costing us a pretty penny in wages.
WTF moment of the season Beating Liverpool 1-0. What a performance. We shut them down constantly and managed a rare clean sheet. Superb.
One thing you'd change for 2023 Less quantity and more quality signings. We've got a full squad now; just make some smart additions to key positions and we might survive.
Rob White

SOUTHAMPTON

Grade your manager(s) C. If Ralph Hasenhuttl was still at Saints, it'd be worse. It'd be harsh to score Nathan Jones any lower, having taken charge of just the 3-1 defeat to Liverpool. He is making all of the right noises so far. **Star man** It has to be Romeo Lavia [above]. It's telling quite how badly Southampton's form dropped off after the midfielder's injury. It's a sad indictment on this Saints side that it's so dependent on an 18-year-old. **Biggest disappointment** The end of Ralph's reign. He's a great man and he gave his absolute all to manage Southampton, but we were stuck on a downwards trajectory under his leadership. A real shame. **WTF moment of the season** Southampton's come-from-behind victory over Chelsea in late August. I don't think any sane Saints fan saw that one coming. **One thing you'd change for 2023** Where do you start? Saints need a striker who can bag some goals, so that needs to be a January priority. **@JJHughes_**

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR

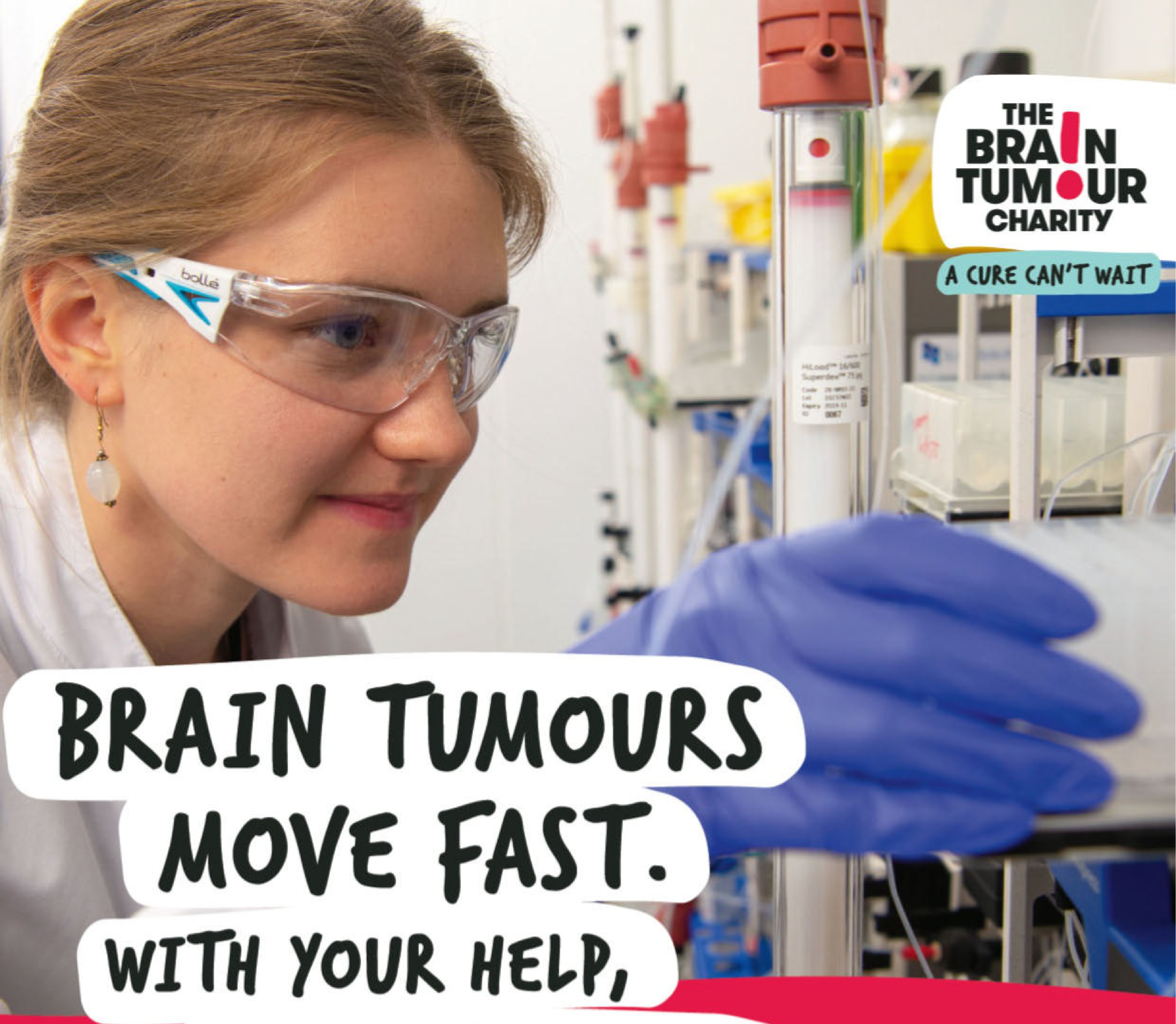
Grade your manager B+. Spurs fans would have taken being in the top four by the World Cup break, having also topped our Champions League group. The style of football and League Cup exit to Nottingham Forest denies Antonio Conte top marks. **Star man** The reason we won't be playing on Thursdays this season (or hopefully next) is Rodrigo Bentancur. Five goals in all competitions already is fantastic for a holding midfielder. **Biggest disappointment** That League Cup exit. Spurs fans are often bashed for the lack of silverware, and what an opportunity we missed with a lot of the big boys falling in the third round. Let's go deep in the FA Cup. **WTF moment of the season** Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg's late, late winner in Marseille. Winning away in the Champions League was a shock, never mind in that style. RIP 'Spursy'. Now: more of that in the league. **One thing you'd change for 2023** Spurs turning up for the first half of games would be nice. **@Lilywhite_Rose**

WEST HAM UNITED

Grade your manager C. Some fans may grade David Moyes lower, but I have faith he'll turn things around. He does, however, need to get us back on course – and very quickly. **Star man** Declan Rice [above]. Hasn't quite reached the same heights as in previous seasons, but he's still head and shoulders above the rest. Flynn Downes and Said Benrahma have also impressed at times. **Biggest disappointment** There have been plenty, particularly three straight defeats before the break. My overall disappointment has been our new signings, including Gianluca Scamacca and Lucas Paqueta, who haven't hit the ground running. **WTF moment of the season** Two contenders: the VAR call at Chelsea that ruled out a late equaliser and Southampton's goal where Jarrod Bowen was obstructed by the ref. **One thing you'd change for 2023** Moyes' in-game management. He always baffles with his substitutions and changes to the formation. **@WestHamMagazine**

WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS

Grade your manager(s) Bruno Lage: D-. Stubborn use of a back four, poor substitutions and no game plan. Steve Davis: C+. He tried his best but, as interim, momentum was against him. Fingers crossed that Julen Lopetegui proves an instant success. **Star man** Ruben Neves. Absolutely no hesitation – he's pure class and a consummate professional; the only player to give his all in every game. **Biggest disappointment** Seeing a talented group of players lacking any cohesion or philosophy and repeatedly passing backwards when deep in the opponents' half. **WTF moment of the season** Nelson Semedo's rugby tackle, the Diego Costa [above] headbutt, or Conor Coady to Everton? It has to be Coady leaving before we realised a back four didn't work. It didn't in previous years. **One thing you'd change for 2023** Become solid at the back to begin with, then pray for a new striker. If we can't improve in front of goal, we're going down, no doubt about it. **David Kent**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HOW'S THIS FOR A HOLLYWOOD ENDING?

Major League Soccer's 2022 Cup Final had a script worthy of Tinseltown's finest writers, with super-sized servings of tragedy, resurrection, unlikely heroes, guest star cameos and – spoiler alert – a slain elephant. Pass us the popcorn...

Words Simon Stephenson

A little before 7am in a park beside the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, a group of Latino men are stringing a banner over a palm tree-lined walkway. Its letters, gold on a black background, spell *Siempre a tu lado*: 'Always by your side'.

It's the first Saturday in November and Major League Soccer's Cup Final is not the biggest sporting event taking place in the United States of America today. It's not even the biggest sporting event taking place in LA. Right across the street, 65,000 football fans – the *other* football – will rock up to watch a college game involving USC Trojans and Cal Bears, relegating the MLS Cup Final between LAFC and Philadelphia Union to the day's second-biggest fixture in the 90037 zip code.

Near to the park, members of the 3252 LAFC supporters' group are erecting gazebos, hooking up stereos and preparing industrial quantities of rice and beans. An hour later, music is blaring, the park is filled with people clad in black and gold, and the line for free breakfast stretches down the street. Vendors moving through the crowds offer cans of Modelo at $5 apiece, but the 3252 have their own beer supply and plenty to share besides.

Named for the capacity of their standing section, the 3252 are LAFC's independent supporters' union. They are the club's heart and soul. Everybody standing in their section must be prepared to commit to 90 minutes of chanting and dancing – anybody willing to do so will be welcomed. Members of the 3252 share LAFC's foundational commitment to respect and diversity. Even the group's battle standard, a skull atop a pole, wears a top hat, as if to imply that any disputes are settled in a gentlemanly fashion. ►

EMPIRE BOYS
FLEX
ACOSTA
3252
3252
'TIL DEATH
WE WILL ADORE YOU

Seemingly intent on testing the 3252's adherence to this courteous code, at 9am a lone Philadelphia Union supporter wanders into the park. He is immediately swarmed by a group of heavy-set men dressed in black and gold. Does he want a drink, they ask? A taco? Directions? The only beef found here is being slow-cooked, seasoned and offered as a savoury olive branch by rival fans.

Half a mile away, other Philadelphia Union fans are getting their party on at a tailgate of their own – a tailgate being the North American sports version of a car boot sale, except that instead of bric-a-brac it's large quantities of booze and food on offer. There are just a few hundred supporters here – it's quite the away trip, with Philadelphia being a six-hour flight away. Philly's hardcore go by the name Sons of Ben and they may be the first supporters' group in history whose existence predates the founding of their club. Named after Philadelphia's own first son, Benjamin Franklin, the self-styled SoBs formed in 2007 to lobby for an MLS franchise to come to their city. They turned up, noisily, to MLS events and eventually got their wish. Philadelphia Union kicked off their maiden competitive match in 2010.

Philadelphia are slight underdogs today, but these SoBs are unconcerned. One points out that Philly is the home of Rocky, and if he can knock out Ivan Drago in Moscow, the Union can surely defeat LAFC in California. His friend offers a metaphor more rooted in 2022: if Los Angeles is Will Smith – in an open marriage and possibly a scientologist, which he denies – then his hometown of Philly is the version of Will Smith who smacks Chris Rock in the mouth for talking s**t about his wife.

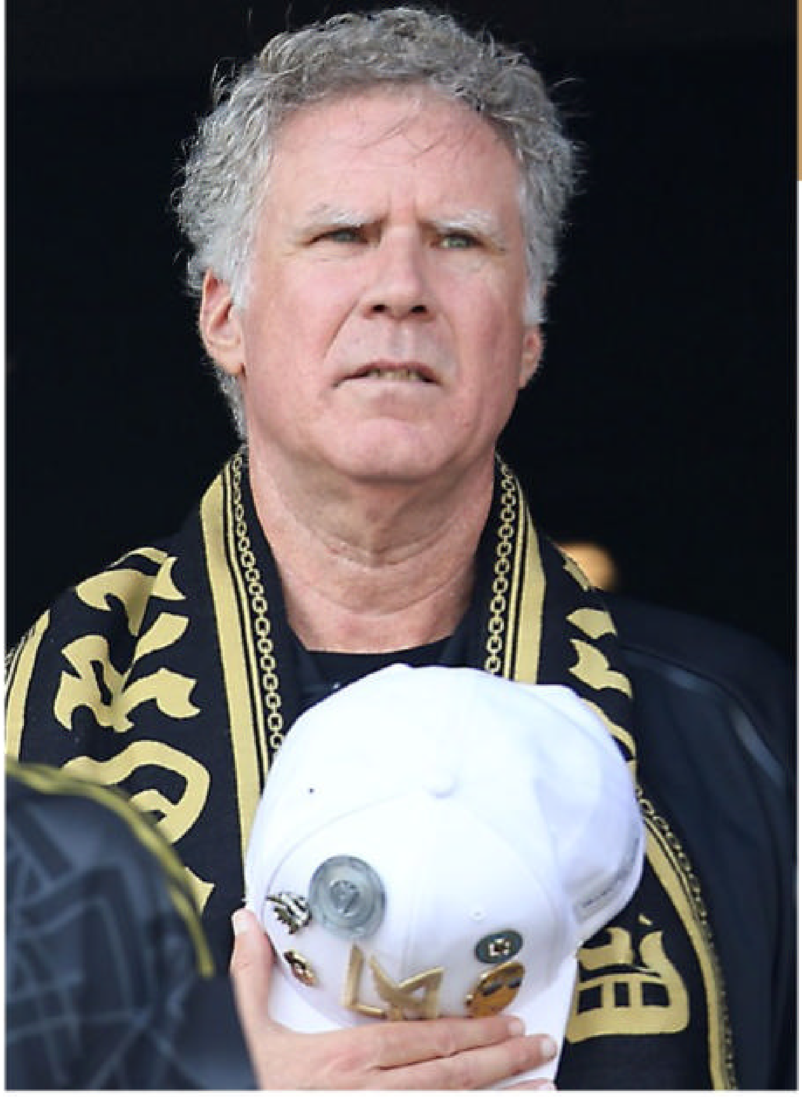
They reassure *FourFourTwo* that they have no animosity towards LAFC – that's reserved for their detested local rivals, New York Red Bulls – but nonetheless they disapprove of LAFC's recent 'chequebook' purchases of Giorgio Chiellini and Gareth Bale. They are sceptical of the salary-cap-compliant deal that brought Bale to Los Angeles. "You really believe he took a pay cut to come out to this s**thole?" asks one. "Me, I wouldn't come to Los Angeles if you paid me." His friend and *FFT* both look at him. "Obviously except for today," he adds. "Today's a special occasion."

Much as they disapprove of Bale, the SoBs aren't afraid of the serial match-winner. He has hardly been playing here, they say, and anyway, everybody knows that Philly's Andre Blake is the best goalkeeper in the league. One fan pays Blake the ultimate compliment a MLS player can receive: "He shouldn't even be playing here. He should be in Europe."

That's the elephant in the room. Depending on their age, MLS is either a stepping stone or a graveyard for a talented player.

MAJOR LOUSY SOCCER

Nobody can deny that soccer has a troubled history in the United States of America. The first organised league was created in 1894 and lasted 17 days. Subsequent efforts fared little better. America didn't get serious about the game until the North American Soccer League was founded in 1968. At the league's peak, Pele and Franz Beckenbauer turned out for New York Cosmos, but it was too much, too soon and the NASL was gone by the early 1980s. For the next decade, a Major Indoor Soccer League flew the flag. This six-a side game including sin-bins owed as much to ice hockey as it did to football.



Above While Rob and Ryan got Wrexham, Will Ferrell drew the short straw and ended up taking over LAFC

AN MLS CUP WIN WOULD BE THE CROWNING GLORY OF ONE OF THE FASTEST RISES IN US SPORTS

Then America was awarded hosting rights to the 1994 World Cup on the proviso that it created a national league. And so MLS began in 1996, featuring 10 clubs and a rocky start: time was kept by a basketball-style buzzer (of course) and tied league games were settled by penalty shootouts (of course). Even once those absurdities were scrapped, the league limped on in half-empty NFL arenas, losing an estimated $350 million in its first eight years.

By the mid-2000s, however, the US men's team had managed to establish themselves as a competitive international outfit, while MLS clubs came to their senses and began to build soccer-specific grounds. David Beckham showed up in LA, too, and attention slowly percolated from the country's big four sports through to soccer; from NBA, NFL, MLB and NHL to MLS.

In recent years the standard has improved almost exponentially, to a point where anybody who regularly watches MLS knows it's a competitive league worthy of respect. The market values of its players would rank somewhere between Championship and the Scottish Premiership level, though even that position seems to underestimate the quality of the football on display. And so, if not today, with arguably the two best MLS teams ever formed playing each other in a showpiece final in one of the world's most famous cities, then when will American soccer ever come of age? When will it ever have a chance as good as this to finally shoot that elephant in the (locker) room?

For LAFC, who came to be in October 2014 but didn't kick a ball competitively until 2018, a first MLS Cup triumph would represent the crowning glory of one of the fastest rises in American sports history. For Philadelphia Union, it would be a long-overdue victory.

By 10am, the 3252 have begun the march to the stadium. Measuring 20 people across and even more deep, they're chanting loudly and waving Mexican, Colombian, Pride and Trans Lives Matter banners. They resemble a medieval army taking to the battlefield.

How did LAFC, in such a short space of time, build a fanbase that bleeds black and gold? By getting everything right: those colours; the community involvement; the emphasis on Central and South American players; the PR dream of having Will Ferrell as an owner. Even the team's name of LAFC – a Welcome-To-Manchester level of hubris in a town that LA Galaxy had called home for two decades – paid off. LAFC supporters witheringly refer to Galaxy as 'Carson', after the distant exurb that houses their stadium. In contrast, the Banc is near downtown LA. Its location off the 110 freeway not only makes it easy to reach, but means thousands of Angelenos drive past its 60ft billboard of Carlos Vela every day. And there's a lot of traffic in LA.

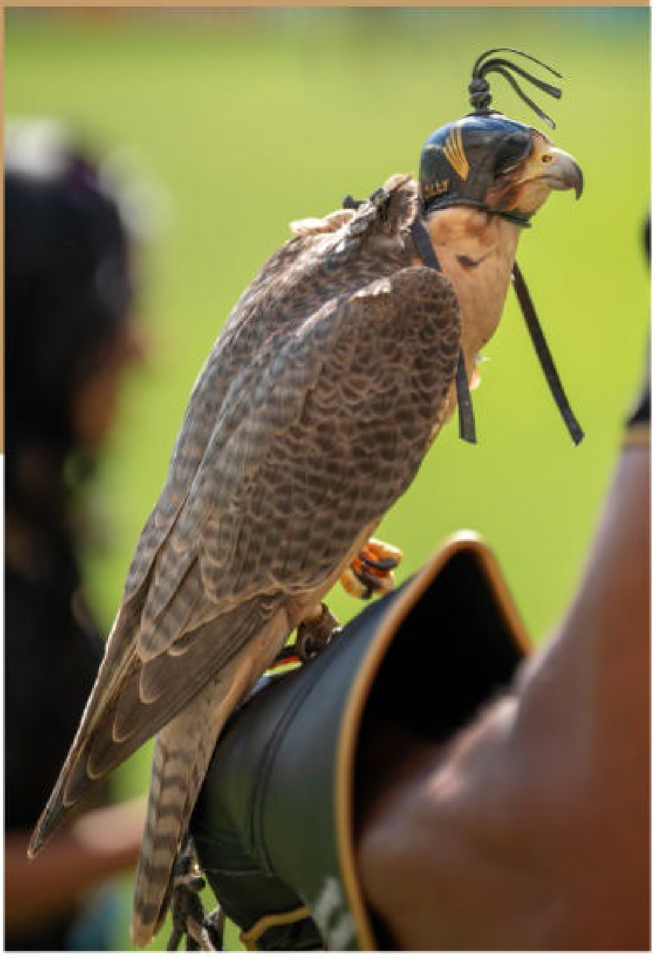
Inside the stadium, the two sets of fans stroll around some airy, polished concrete concourses, deciding whether to eat at the Banc's plant-based chicken stand, Wolfies, or long-standing LA-based Korean barbecue business Seoul Sausage. With no restrictions on alcohol being consumed within sight of the pitch, the bars are doing a brisk trade in *micheladas*, a Mexican quaff comprising beer, lime juice, assorted sauces, spices and chilli peppers. LAFC and Union supporters mingle freely, and the atmosphere is so relaxed that former Philadelphia and USMNT star Maurice Edu can wander through the concourse alone, happily chatting with fans.

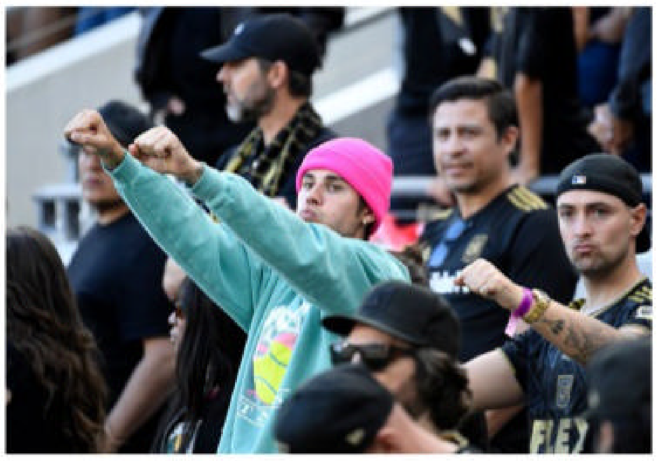
Twenty-five minutes before kick-off, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* creator Rob McElhenney – who, with Ryan Reynolds, took ownership of Wrexham AFC in 2021 – and LAFC fan Colin 'Son of Tom' Hanks carry the MLS Cup onto the pitch. LAFC fans applaud respectfully, but they are impatient for the real pre-match star: a falcon named Olly.

LAFC's home matches traditionally begin with Olly flying about the Banc before sinking her talons into a puck emblazoned with the visiting team's logo. The overhead cameras in use today mean Olly is grounded, but she's paraded nonetheless. She looks as bemused as the rest of us as we watch a pre-recorded video of her attacking the Union logo outside her handler's suburban home.

WELSH DRAGON BALL Z

When the teams emerge, Philadelphia are greeted with a chorus of boos that might be seen as unsporting on some continents but is the norm here. LAFC receive a rapturous ▸





Above Budget cuts have hit the latest *Guardians of the Galaxy* flick pretty hard

LAFC BUILT A FANBASE FAST BY GETTING EVERYTHING RIGHT: PR, COLOURS, CULTURE, COMMUNITY

welcome and then the 22,384 crowd stands and removes their caps as the traditional a cappella rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner* is performed. As the national anthem finishes, five military planes fly overhead and a vast manga tifo is inexplicably hoisted in front of the 3252. A child sitting nearby explains that it is Gogeta, a character from *Dragon Ball Z* who has superhuman strength, speed, endurance and durability, and who can manipulate energy in the form of blasts and flight. As we wonder what any of this has to do with football, the kid's dad reveals that manga is hugely popular in Mexico.

As both sides' starting players take to their positions, five-time Champions League winner Bale trudges towards the substitutes' bench. Yesterday his old Spanish nemesis, *Marca*, published a headline that was dripping with schadenfreude: 'Gareth Bale: The Saddest Story in a Dream Season for LAFC in 2022'. For once, their criticism seemed valid: during his time in California, Bale has started only two matches, scoring twice. There have been claims of injuries and a lack of match fitness, but underneath it all lies a nagging question: is it now Wales, Golf, Los Angeles, in that order?

With seconds remaining until kick-off, thick black smoke streams out of the 3252 behind Gogeta. They are almost entirely obscured. And at that point the LAFC supporters light red flares, loud drumming starts, and their signature chant echoes across the stadium:

Dalé, dalé, dalé, black and gold,
Dalé, dalé, dalé, black and gold,
Daléééééé, black and gooooold!

The 3252 are stood behind the goal that Philadelphia will be shooting towards in the opening period. Between the smoke, flares, chanting and drums, they might as well be trying to score in the mouth of hell.

The football is fast-paced and technical. Play is built up from the back and balls are aimed at feet, not heads. But it's still a final: both teams are well-organised and evenly matched, so any breakthrough seems likely to come from a set-piece. Sure enough, on 27 minutes LAFC's World Cup-bound Kellyn Acosta – who suffered the ignominy of being mistaken for a Union player by a European journalist at the pre-match press conference – fires off a free-kick that takes a deflection and spins into the Union net.

Shortly before the hour mark, Union's Hungarian international, Daniel Gazdag, nets a well-earned equaliser in the aftermath of a corner. LAFC's Colombian defender, Jesus Murillo, responds by powering home Vela's 83rd-minute corner to make it 2-1, but LAFC fans haven't even finished celebrating when Union's Jack Elliott – a gigantic centre-back who progressed to MLS via the American college system, having been born in London to two Rangers-mad Scottish parents – heads in a second equaliser from a free-kick. Four goals, all from set-pieces.

As the game enters extra time, the 3252 continue to sing, although the atmosphere has chilled. Even owner Ferrell looks worried when his face appears on the big screen. The sight of Bale coming on for LAFC legend Vela after 97 minutes does little to calm nerves, especially as he stretches out his hamstrings at every single stoppage, underscoring his lack of match fitness.

The final is 10 minutes from penalties when disaster strikes for LAFC. A sloppy backpass exposes goalkeeper Maxime Crepeau, who has no choice but to rush out of his box and challenge Union's Cory Burke in a 50-50 tackle – whatever the cost. The cost turns out to be very high indeed. Alongside his red card, Crepeau incurs a broken leg requiring surgery. The Canadian custodian was set to be on his national team's plane to Qatar later in the month, but that dream is over. After nine minutes of treatment he is eventually carted off, giving a thumbs up as he goes. To lay on some extra narrative to this drama, Crepeau's replacement is John McCarthy, a Philadelphia-born former Union player who has made just one appearance for LAFC. By his own admission, he hasn't lifted a trophy since he was a schoolboy. He's now 30.

The 10 men of LAFC weather the storm as best they can, but when the fourth official's board is raised, it shows a hefty nine minutes of added time. After three of them, Elliott bundles in his second goal of the game after a wondersave from McCarthy, and Union think they have their *Rocky* ending. Distraught LAFC supporters shower the celebrating Union players with empty plastic bottles, but neither the players nor the Sons of Ben care. Why would they, when they're about to win a first MLS Cup in extra, extra time?

In the eighth of the nine added minutes, the Sons of Ben's whistles grow even shriller and the referee seems very distracted by his watch. LAFC's Diego Palacios makes a final, desperate run down the left wing and lofts a Hail Mary towards a busy penalty area.

The timing is perfect for Bale to perform his Gogeta routine. The 6ft 1in Welshman leaps, rises above the 6ft 6in Scots-English Elliott, who thought he had won the game a few minutes earlier, and powers a header past diving Union goalkeeper, Andre Blake. It's 3-3. It's ridiculous.

ACT THREE

Time for penalties. The opener falls to LAFC's Cristian Tello, recruited from Real Betis and formerly of Barcelona, and even the 3252 quieten themselves to avoid distracting him. They needn't have bothered. Tello jogs up to the ball, stutters his run and scuffs a tame attempt for Blake to gather with ease and undisguised delight.

The theatre has just begun. Gazdag steps up as Union's first penalty taker, and placing the ball on the spot he looks as cool as Ivan Drago. Then he slips, John Terry-style, and Baggios the ball high into the delighted 3252.

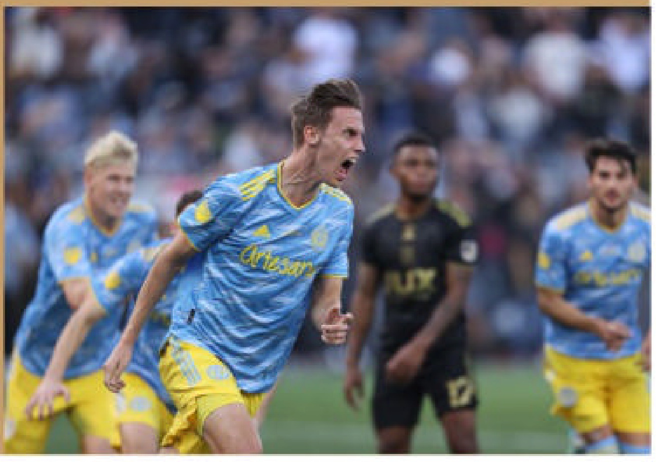
Denis Bouanga buries LAFC's second effort, then supersub McCarthy saves Union's, diving to his right. 1-0. Ryan Hollingshead converts LAFC's third down the middle as Blake leaps to his right, virtually at the start of the taker's run-up. Kai Wagner hits Union's third penalty hard to the keeper's left; McCarthy guesses correctly again, however, and makes another save. 2-0. The standard of penalties isn't doing MLS any favours, but it is ratcheting up the drama in a city that loves a plot twist.

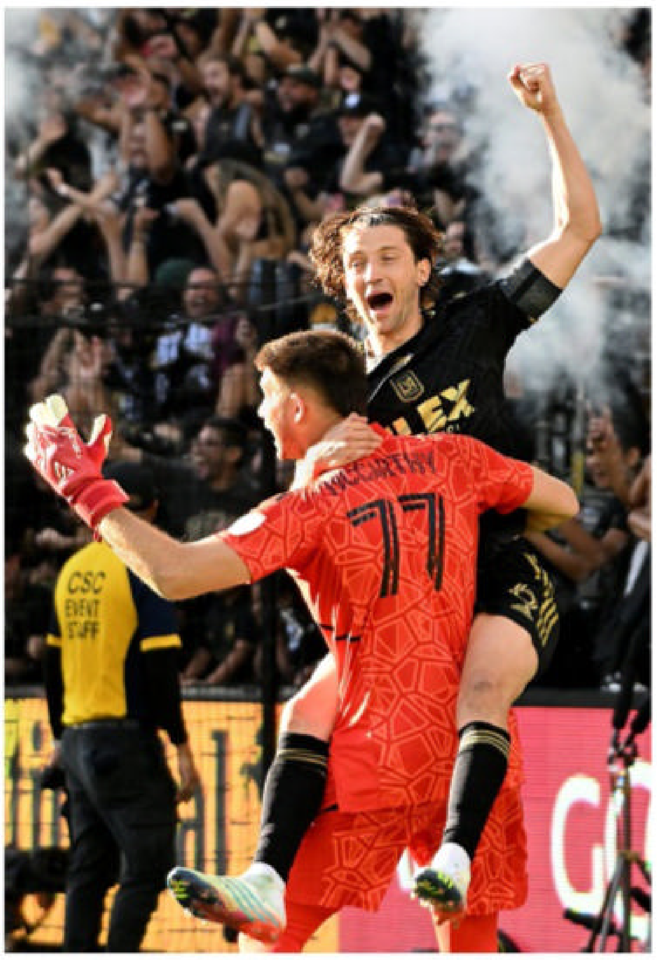
Midfielder Ilie Sanchez made more than 100 appearances for Barcelona B. Now he will take LAFC's potentially MLS Cup-winning fourth kick. He goes to Blake's left, but the Jamaican follows him and gets down in time. Fearful spectators hear the dull thunk of ball on gloves, yet the power on Ilie's shot has carried the ball through Blake's palms and into the net – it's 3-0, and game over.

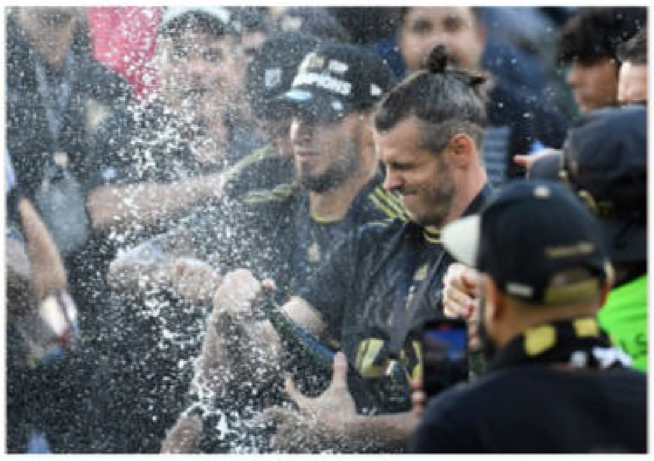
McCarthy realises his team have won only when he is smothered by delirious team-mates, and even then he visibly can't believe it. Devastated Union players plummet to their knees. On another day they could have won. Some day, they probably will. The Sons of Ben try to console the team they birthed, but it will be a long journey home for all.

Cup final celebrations are the same the world over: silver tape, sprayed champagne, players' kids on the pitch. But here there are additional scenes: Ferrell making a lap of the stadium, high-fiving every fan who raises a hand; Crepeau, the fallen hero, appearing on the big screen as he FaceTimes from his hospital bed, still giving that thumbs up. More than anything, though, there is the 3252. LAFC players head in their direction holding the trophy, and the two groups can be heard singing the same thing: *"Somos campeones! Somos familia!"*

Leaving the Banc, we pass USC Trojans fans heading off to their American Football game. Whatever they watch can't possibly compete with what those of us present just witnessed today. Soccer finally came of age in the USA. That locker-room elephant has been slain. ○







"IT'S THE SWEAT, BLOOD, SNOT AND TEARS AND A GET-STUCK-IN MENTALITY. I LOVE IT"

When Rod Stewart invited *FourFourTwo* to watch his beloved Celtic with him, it was an invitation too good to turn down. What followed was a day drinking Irn-Bru from crystal glasses, sharing stories with the Lisbon Lions and a special gig at the Barrowlands

Words Richard Purden

Rod Stewart is in the East Lothian village of Ormiston, with his Young Hoops Under-12s team about to kick off against Hibernian's boys at the club's training ground. *Maggie May* blasts out of the dressing room on an autumnal Saturday morning. Rod is in his element, informing one parent, "This is the land of my father". He shakes hands with another in a hand-knitted Rangers bobble hat.

It's a plucky 1-1 draw but the contest is not without incident. An ambulance is called for Aidan Stewart, Rod's 11-year-old son, who is wrapped in a large foil blanket. A second ambulance is sent for when it emerges another lad has concussion.

While the boys recover, our interview is understandably rescheduled for three weeks later at the more stately surroundings of Celtic Park, where the Hoops are about to face Dundee United on Guy Fawkes Day, in what will turn out to be a late 4-2 win for the home side. As we sit down in The Walfrid, Celtic's five-star restaurant, Champagne is poured on arrival. It isn't long before an abundance of excitable supporters quickly rush to approach the 77-year-old singer and knight of the realm for a photo or a signature.

This first happened over 50 years ago, while Stewart was watching Celtic's newest sensation hit the back of the net in a 5-1 win against the Tangerines, at Tannadice Park in November 1971. "I first saw Kenny Dalglish playing for Celtic against Dundee United in '71," says Stewart. "I was with my girlfriend, Dee Harrington, and starting to get famous, so I kept covered up with a hat on. When the hat came off, that was it."

Stewart's "old mucker", Al, politely explains to the gathering throng that Rod is doing an interview and we get down to business.

"We thought my boy had a heart attack," he reveals of our previous encounter. "He was going blue and was unconscious until he calmed down. It was scary, but it turned out to be a panic attack. The lad wanted to do well, pulling on the Hoops in Scotland for his dad. Another boy fell backwards and banged his head – he's still not back. In all of my days watching football, that's the only time two ambulances have been called."

The following day, Rod's boys were invited to Lennoxtown, Celtic's state-of-the-art training complex in East Dunbartonshire, where they would hobnob with first-team players while getting the five-star treatment.

"That never happened to me when I was 12 – what a day!" he chuckles. "Celtic laid on a beautiful restaurant for us and everything was paid for. What a top club. We were beaten 3-0 by the Celtic boys and 2-0 by Aberdeen but we won 7-1 a few days later against a Premiership team, who thought they just had to turn up. My boys learned a lot – to get their heads up and pass the f**king ball!"

The Scottish cockney began to support Celtic through his friendships with Bhoys players. The morning after playing Glasgow Apollo just before Christmas 1973, Stewart, along with his lifelong friend, former Faces band-mate and future Rolling Stone, Ronnie Wood, awoke to a knock at their hotel room door. Before them stood Dalglish and 1967 European Cup-winning Lisbon Lion Jimmy Johnstone, inviting them to Celtic's training session at manager Jock Stein's insistence.

"I was wearing an unfortunate pair of shoes for winter," he remembers, "and Jock laughed. I fell in love with Celtic after that."

Stewart first attended Scotland games with his dad and his Rangers-supporting brother, Bob. "We never fought about it," he insists, before disclosing the complexities of being born in Highgate, north London and being a Scotland fan. "It's been that way ever since

Below Rod is a familiar face in the Parkhead directors' box **Right** "Let me tell you about Jim Baxter, young laddie..."

I was 12. I couldn't understand why my dad and brother were cheering for Scotland. The penny didn't drop until the way home from a match, when I noticed all of the Scottish flags. A few days later I was looking at Bob's newspaper cuttings: they were all Scottish players in England, or Rangers players.

"My dad was a Scotsman from Leith, and a big Hibs supporter. He was in the Merchant Navy with his three brothers, all in their early teens. They couldn't get work up there and eventually they ended up in London, where my dad became a plumber.

"I came up to see England play Scotland in 1966 at Hampden Park. My brother said to me, 'For f**k's sake, don't open your mouth'."

Rod's encounters with the Auld Enemy have been colourful affairs. He still recalls the day Billy Wright won his 100th England cap at Wembley in April 1959, as well as the time in May 1974 his friend, Johnstone, got lost at sea "after a few bevvies" and had to be rescued by the Largs coastguard. "We still won 2-0," he says, "and Jimmy was superb."

A training session with the Scotland team under Craig Brown is a less fond recollection. "I had my Celtic tracksuit on and he said, 'You can't go out there like that!' I said, 'I'm a Celtic fan – if you don't like it…'" Before Rod can finish his sentence, former Celtic player, club ambassador and now U17s boss George McCluskey pops over to say a quick hello.

The striker, who also enjoyed successful spells at Leeds and Hibs, scored the only goal of the 1980 Scottish Cup Final, causing a riot that was described by commentator Archie McPherson as "like a scene out of *Apocalypse Now*". The match led to an alcohol ban at Scottish grounds.

"I CAME TO SEE ENGLAND PLAY SCOTLAND IN 1966. MY BROTHER SAID TO ME, 'FOR F**K'S SAKE, DON'T OPEN YOUR MOUTH'"

As McCluskey departs, our chat switches to an altogether more personal 'controversy': what's Rod's opinion on former Celtic gaffer Brendan Rodgers' untimely exit in February 2019? "I don't want to talk about him," he spits. The rambunctious atmosphere has fallen somewhat silent, glasses have stopped clinking, and I'm now further out to sea than Jimmy Johnstone.

With Stewart's 1977 hit single, *I Don't Want To Talk About It*, stuck in my head, it's time to move on quickly to safer ground. The singer admits he has few famous friends – only the aforementioned Wood, who he's rubbed along with since 1964, and ex-Celtic and Scotland manager Gordon Strachan.

"I love Gordon," says Stewart, smiling. "He was the first manager to take Celtic to the last 16 of the Champions League." Strachan faced Sir Alex Ferguson, his old Aberdeen and Manchester United boss, in 2006-07 and beat the Red Devils 1-0 to grant Celtic that historic European achievement. Rod cites the Shunsuke Nakamura free-kick that delivered the game's only goal as "the best I've seen".

Strachan's departure from Scotland after failing to reach the 2018 World Cup remains a sore point. Had they scored once more in their final qualifier against Slovenia, instead of drawing 2-2, the Tartan Army would have made the play-offs. "I know he's my mate but come on: it was one goal and they let him go," laments Rod. "You don't get rid of someone because of that! I wrote a letter to the SFA – it was bang out of order!"

Scotland's current manager, Steve Clarke, whose side will meet Spain, Norway, Georgia and Cyprus in Euro 2024 qualifying, also has the Stewart seal of approval.

"Steve's a very cool guy," beams Rod. "He doesn't get over-excited or under-excited. He handles what we've got really well. We don't have the best players in the world but if you make your side a fighting unit, you'll go somewhere. John McGinn is a good player; so is his brother, Paul [of Motherwell]. Celtic should have got him. What was the amount, £300,000? I would have put that in."

It's time to make our way to the directors' box. Just in front of us is retired former Celtic chief executive Peter Lawwell. Captain Callum McGregor, unavailable until after the World Cup due to a knee problem, sits behind. Rod turns around to enquire, "Did you ever see Jim Baxter play?" The answer is no.

What brings the late Rangers and Scotland player, who retired 23 years before McGregor was born, to Stewart's mind is midfielder Matt O'Riley, who for Rod's money would also make a great rock 'n' roll frontman.

"Let me tell you about Jim Baxter," he continues. "You look at videos of Baxter and watch what he does with his hands – he was like a conductor, orchestrating the side. When you look at O'Riley, he is exactly the same – I just hope we don't lose him." ▸

Celtic go into the break 2-1 up thanks to a Sead Haksabanovic brace. We venture into the boardroom for a restorative pie and some sparkling Irn-Bru, served in a crystal glass.

Lisbon Lion and former dentist Jim Craig (below) stops for a quick word in front of the European Cup that he helped to bring to Glasgow in 1967. Rod poses for a snap next to a bust of Craig's former boss, Jock Stein.

"He made football sound like poetry and made you proud to be a Celtic supporter," says Stewart of the iconic Hoops manager, known to his players as Mr Stein. Rod recalls the tragic moment in September 1985 when Scotland's 1-1 draw at Ninian Park in Cardiff took them to the World Cup, only for Stein to suffer a pulmonary edema at full-time.

"I was in Wales the night he died," he says. "I saw him go over, but I thought it was just indigestion or something. It went from 'Oh my God, we've qualified for the World Cup' to 'Jock Stein is dead'.

"I can't say I knew him well, but I was at his funeral. He rubbed off on Sir Alex Ferguson [who managed Scotland at Mexico 86 in Stein's place]. How can someone like that not rub off on you?"

With a mouthful of Irn-Bru still to quench, talk turns to the first-half action, in which Dundee United's 12th-minute goal came from a controversial Steven Fletcher penalty that was awarded following a handball spotted only by the VAR. What would Stein have made of it all?

"I think he would have embraced it," says Stewart. "I think Jock had the same idea as me that if it's offside, it's offside, whether it's the player's teeth or his toes. What's that joke about Luis Suarez? He wasn't offside but his teeth were!

"If it goes for you, then that's great, but if doesn't then the attitude goes that the refs are taking their foot off the gas. I'd rather have it this way than not."

When we return to the dimming daylight of Paradise for the second half, the Hoops are under pressure and Dundee United level in the 87th minute. But another Celtic late show, with stoppage-time goals from Kyogo Furuhashi and Liel Abada, seals a 4-2 win. Celtic's we-never-stop mentality, as well as the passing game of 'Ange-ball' under Greece-born Australia-raised coach Ange Postecoglou, has paid off handsomely again.

"I like the way Ange handles himself: he never puts people down and he's here for the long haul," says Rod of the Celtic boss.

"When we beat Rangers, I sent him a nice bottle of Australian wine. I love the way we are playing. I've never seen a team move the ball so accurately and quickly. They are so sharp – it's gorgeous football to watch".

Three days earlier, Celtic's 2022-23 Champions League campaign ended with a 5-1 defeat to Real Madrid at the Bernabeu.

"It was f**king rotten luck with two early penalties which took the sting out of the game," says Stewart, Real having taken a 2-0 lead within 21 minutes through spot-kicks netted by Luka Modric and Rodrygo. "What I loved was that the fans were still singing. Only Celtic supporters would do that! What about Jota's goal, too?!"

Rod believes there's much to be positive about from the European campaign, though.

"The first 45 minutes against Real Madrid [at Celtic Park] were unbelievable," he says, before turning his attention to the Hoops' effervescent display in October's 1-1 home draw against Shakhtar Donetsk. "I was so proud watching them. Shakhtar couldn't get out of their own half. We got caught on the break again – if we can stop that, we've got some team. Next year we'll get to the knockouts, I promise."

MY FOOTBALL

ROD STEWART
CELTIC

Who from Celtic's past would you bring back?
I always said when Jonny Hayes went that he was a class full-back. He scored a wonderful goal against Rangers during a 2-0 win [in September 2019].

Which player do you like even though they never played for Celtic?
Eric Caldow was a brilliant player for Rangers in the '50s and '60s. His Scotland career came to an end after Bobby Smith broke his leg during a win over England. I played against Bobby during a charity match back in the '70s; I was staying at a lovely place in Windsor and said, "Bobby, why don't you come back to the house for a cup of tea or sherry or something?" When we got back, he asked for a loan of some money – 300 quid. I went upstairs and gave him the money. I never saw him again.

Where's the best place you've watched a game?
The most unusual was the Shanghai Celtic Supporters' Club. I was on my way to Australia and Celtic had a cup game, so I stopped off to stay overnight. It was this tiny little room full of Celtic supporters, with a tiny screen that kept coming and going, but it was fantastic. It was one of those nights you'll never forget.

You're known for doing possibly the greatest cup draw ever...
We'd drank a couple of bevvies and Sky asked me if I'd like to do it. I said, "Listen, I've had a couple of drinks" and they said it was fine. I'm an ad-lib guy and, lo and behold, I just pissed about a bit. It went around the world and became one of the most high-profile Scottish Cup draws that's ever been and probably ever will be.

How did it feel to present the trophy when Celtic won the Scottish League Cup in 2015?
It was one of the greatest memories. I was pleased for my little Alastair – he was really chuffed to see Scott Brown. I say little – Alastair's 6ft 5in now and just come back from Italy with his girlfriend.

Back in the Premiership, three points are in the bag against Dundee United and Celtic's celebrations continue. As Rod heads for the exit, he stops for a moment to help security line up barriers, as shouts of "Up the Hoops!", "Hail, Hail!" and "Over here, Rod!" fill the air alongside Bonfire Night fireworks popping in Glasgow's East End. While he scribbles an autograph for a supporter in the shadows of the Jock Stein and Jimmy Johnstone statues, a youngster asks Stewart, "Who's better: Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo?" Without missing a beat, he replies, "Neither – they're both finished."

We bundle into a people carrier, pass the Billy McNeill statue on The Celtic Way and go through Glasgow to the Radisson RED Hotel overlooking the River Clyde. We travel past lively boozers and chip shops bustling with jubilant punters in green-and-white. This is the passion that keeps Stewart entranced.

Above Rod chats with fellow Hoops outside the ground **Below and bottom left** On the pitch, his beloved Bhoys fight back to eventually beat Dundee United

“SKY ASKED IF I'D DO THE CUP DRAW. I SAID, 'LOOK, I'VE HAD A COUPLE OF DRINKS'. I JUST PISSED ABOUT – IT TOOK OFF”

"It's all I'm interested in, because it's wonderfully honest," he says. "It's the sweat, blood, snot and tears and a get-stuck-in mentality. I love it, I'll stand by it and I'll always support it."

At the hotel, after a fight with an ironing board, it's a quick changeover for Rod. There's just time to open a bottle of wine and slip into some glad rags, which feature a patterned metallic jacket and black trousers, with smart grey brogues replacing a pair of brothel-creepers.

Rod the Mod's fancy footwork began with having trials for Brentford in his teens. How close was he to making it as a professional?

"They didn't even call me back; I sat by the phone for days," he says of his 16-year-old self. "I used to play in the Athenian League for Finchley from north London. It was a good standard of football, but at that time I was falling in love with music."

The time has come for us to dart back to the East End of Glasgow and the famous Barrowland Ballroom for the Scottish Music Awards. "It's the first time I've ever been to the Barrowlands", admits the singer. "It's ridiculous that I've never played or even been there before. It's one of the most wonderful venues – I've read about it so many times."

After collecting a Lifetime Achievement Award, Sir Roderick David Stewart proudly performs *Maggie May*, the song that sealed his transfer to rock royalty in 1971. It's his equivalent of a European Cup. He plays his signature track in one of the world's most iconic venues and the energy in the arena, where the likes of David Bowie and Oasis made history, resembles a cup final.

His gravel voice has been name-checked by Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen as one of the greatest of all time, but he can pen a song, too. He wrote, or co-wrote many of his biggest hits, including *You Wear It Well* and *Tonight's the Night*.

Backing Rod is Johnny Mac & the Faithful, who will then support him on a forthcoming arena tour. Stewart also guested on the band's debut single, *Me Oh My*, while their frontman, John McLaughlin, produced a trio of Celtic songs sung by Shane MacGowan.

There's no shortage of Hoops diehards picking up awards tonight, among them Clare Grogan, Lewis Capaldi and Paolo Nutini. Rod sits down after collecting his gong and there's more than a hint of emotion. The conversation turns to his father and brothers' passion for the game. Rod's brother, Don, passed away just a few months ago. The youngest of five siblings, he is now the father of eight children, to five mothers, and is raising the next generation of his Scottish clan with the same passion for club and country.

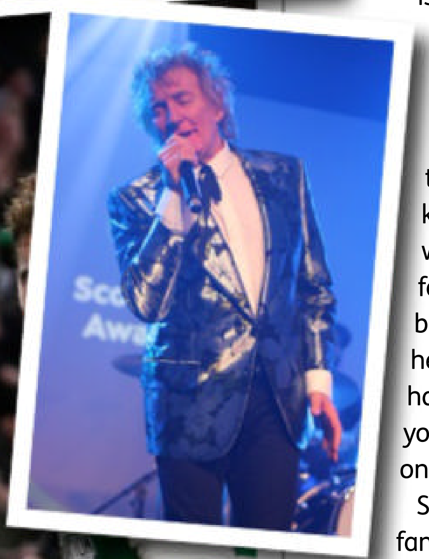
"Our dad was a very quiet man but was football through and through," says Stewart. "I don't know how much influence a dad will have, but all of my boys play football and so did I with my two brothers. I'm just sorry my dad isn't here to see me get this award. I've had a knighthood and every award you can imagine, but this is the first one from the land of my father."

Stewart isn't shy of shedding a tear, famously doing so when watching Celtic beat Barcelona in the 2012-13 Champion League. "It wasn't on the cards – there was no way we were going to beat Barça," he says. "I'd had a few beers before the game, then you hear the Green Brigade and all the fans singing... how can I explain it? I was overcome with emotion that night."

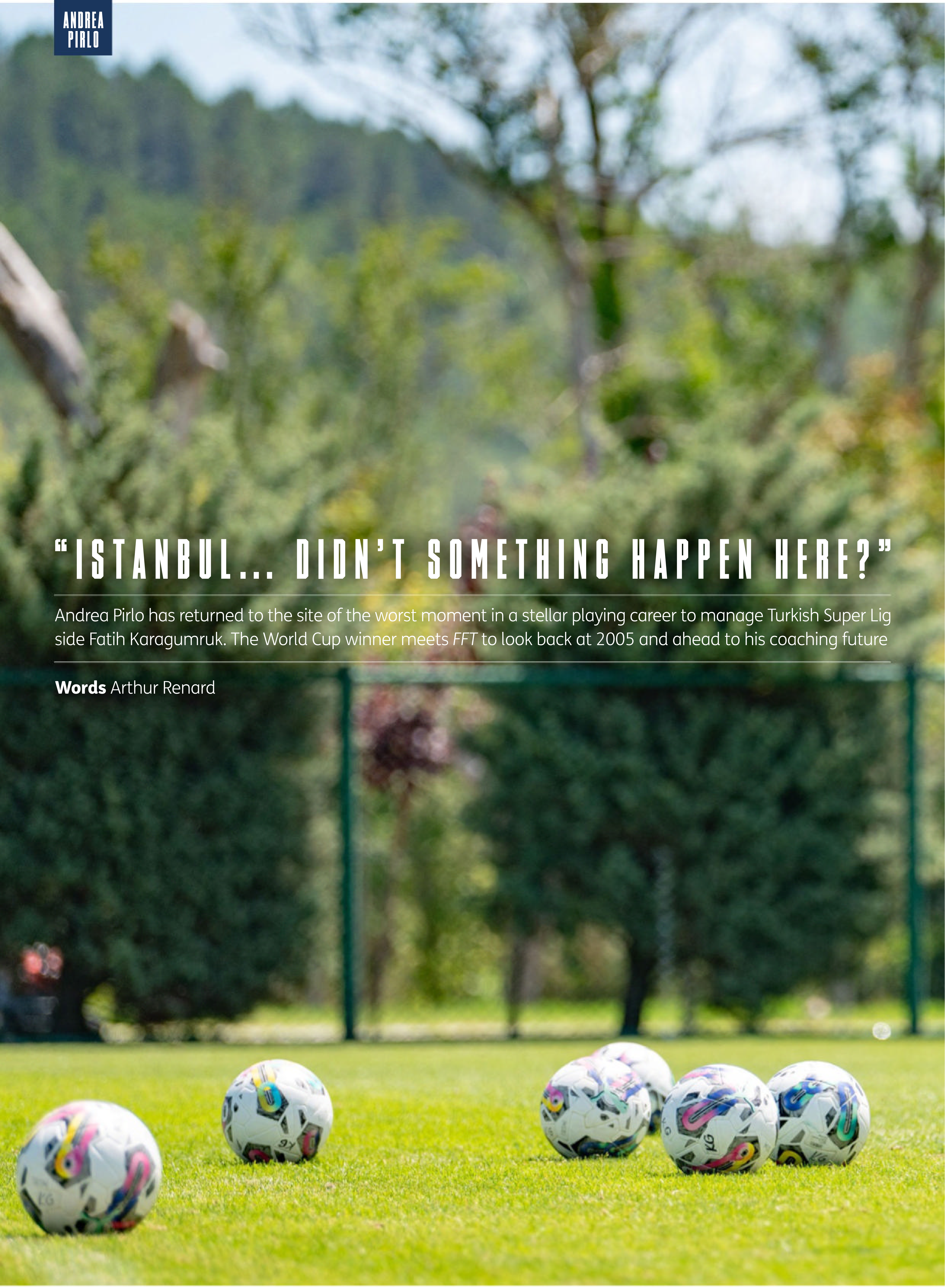
Emotion is what links Stewart to this land. After a power cut onstage in Glasgow some years ago, his natural instinct was to lead the crowd in a rendition of *Flower of Scotland*.

After a day in Rod Stewart's company, I feel I've tasted the highs and lows of his greatest football memories and, in the words of the 1971 Faces cut, *Had Me a Real Good Time*.

Rod is on his final greatest hits arena tour of the UK. For ticket details, visit rodstewart.com



CELTIC FC FOUNDATION
CHRISTMAS APPEAL



“ISTANBUL... DIDN’T SOMETHING HAPPEN HERE?”

Andrea Pirlo has returned to the site of the worst moment in a stellar playing career to manage Turkish Super Lig side Fatih Karagumruk. The World Cup winner meets *FFT* to look back at 2005 and ahead to his coaching future

Words Arthur Renard

A.P
A.P
WULFZ
WULFZ

Not even Andrea Pirlo listens to Andrea Pirlo.

"I wouldn't bet a single cent on me becoming a manager," the Italian wrote in his 2013 autobiography, *Penso Quindi Gioco* ('I Think Therefore I Play'). "It is not a job I'm attracted to. There are too many worries and the lifestyle is far too close to that of a player. I've done my bit and, in the future, I would like to get back even a semblance of a private life."

Pirlo was his generation's coolest operator, an effortless midfielder of such insouciant grace for Milan, Juventus and Italy, among others, that you almost felt as if football was a means to an end to fund his true passion: the winery he opened in 2007. Yet, seven years after making his prediction, the man nicknamed *l'Architetto* ('the Architect') by his 2006 World Cup-winning peers found himself back at Juve as the manager he'd promised himself he would never become. What gives?

Two years after his book was released, Pirlo joined New York City FC in July 2015. In his first full MLS campaign, his stance softened. Patrick Vieira – another midfield maestro, albeit preferring the scythe to Pirlo's sickle – became NYCFC's manager and told the soon-to-be-retired pair of Frank Lampard and Pirlo, respectively two and three years his junior, that their dugout aversion might change.

"Patrick told Frank and I, 'You'll see'," Pirlo recalls now, with a smile. "He said, 'In a few years' time, both of you are going to become managers, because this is what happens eventually. To begin with, you don't want to do it, but then your mind and your desire will lead you to become a coach'. That's exactly what happened. I wasn't thinking about it at all, but then I attended courses to get the coaching licence, just in case. Gradually, that desire started to grow, and here I am."

Unlike Vieira, or Lampard starting at Derby, Pirlo's first coaching job was with one of the world's biggest clubs. He had been slated for a season in charge of Juve's under-23s, but instead there would be no gradual path – just straight into the Turin furnace, nine days after Maurizio Sarri left in July 2020. As football somehow persisted mid-pandemic, Pirlo won the Coppa Italia, but a fourth-placed Serie A finish meant he was out after one season. It was a rude awakening to life as a manager and he needed a year to decompress.

In June 2022, he surprisingly went to Fatih Karagumruk in Turkey's top tier. Istanbul isn't just any city to Pirlo. Far away from his Italian comfort zone, it is also where, 17 years ago, he suffered his biggest heartbreak in a career that yielded 17 major honours as a player for club and country. Now, the 43-year-old tells *FFT* that he wants to make amends.

"LOSING THAT FINAL WILL REMAIN FOREVER"

May 25, 2005 is still the worst day in Milan's modern history. The Rossoneri's 3-0 lead at half-time of the Champions League final evaporated as Rafa Benitez's tactical acuity and Jerzy Dudek's wobbly legs secured

Liverpool's comeback, in what is now known – though less fondly in Milan – as the Miracle of Istanbul. Pirlo, whose spot-kick was saved in the penalty shootout, was inconsolable afterwards and briefly considered quitting football altogether. He had just turned 26.

"Even today we can't understand what happened," Pirlo tells *FFT*. "We played one of the best first halves of any final, not only at European level but in general. We even had some chances to make it 4-0 at the start of the second half. Then they scored three goals in seven minutes and, from one moment to the next, you can't react any more."

He believes fate intervened. "We had more chances to win the game, but when a match is meant to go a certain way, there is simply nothing you can do to take it in a different direction," he says, adding that at no point did Milan underestimate their opponents, as some Liverpool players have suggested.

"No, we had the same approach," continues Pirlo. "We knew the match wasn't finished – that's always the case when you're playing an English team, with loads of supporters in the stadium and with the spirit Liverpool have always had. We played well, but it went down in a way no one could have imagined. I've never watched that game back."

When fate – that word again – brought the two teams together in the 2007 Champions League Final, there was only one thing on Pirlo's mind: "revenge after losing in Istanbul, to prove the side we were". Milan and Pirlo did just that, his free-kick on the stroke of half-time deflecting off Filippo Inzaghi for the opening goal in a 2-1 win. Did that ease the pain suffered two years previously?

"No, no," Pirlo responds immediately. "The memory of the final that we lost stayed, because we lost in such a bad way. It was a way to get revenge, as we had the chance to win that trophy against them, but the feeling of losing that first final in Istanbul will remain forever."

Overcoming setbacks is something Pirlo learned at a young age.

In his formative years playing in the Brescia youth teams in the early 1990s, his extreme natural talent caused problems, even among his own team. His father, Luigi – the founder of the family's Elg Steel business – frequently had to move his seat to avoid hearing other parents' negative comments about his son. Pirlo himself could feel the jealousy; in one match, his team-mates repeatedly refused to pass him the ball.

"Perhaps at that age there would be envy among parents and players, because people talk about you a lot and for others it's tough," he recalls of experiences that have shaped his philosophy, particularly now as a coach. "It led me to do my best in every competition and every training session. I learned that there's always room for improvement, no matter what level you reach. You must earn your spot every single day.

"Not everything comes easy in life, nor goes the way you want it to. I experienced small issues when I was a youngster because when everybody thinks you're the best, people put you on the spot."

PlayStation 2
MasterCard
DUDEK
1

GOLDEN
STEWA

Left It took balls for Pirlo to come back to Istanbul **Top** Jerzy Dudek charges down Pirlo's spot-kick **Above** Revenge in 2007 could never eliminate the pain of 2005

> "WHEN A FOOTBALL MATCH IS MEANT TO GO A CERTAIN WAY, THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO TAKE IT IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION"

Such was his technical ability, a 15-year-old Pirlo began to train with Brescia's first team, managed by Mircea Lucescu. Again, the kid faced hostility. He was regularly kicked by older players who didn't particularly like this maverick attacking midfielder's showboating in training sessions.

"There were players who were 30, 32, and they'd see this lad of 15, with one foot in the first team already, who the coach would always highlight and tell them not to hurt; I would show off a little bit, and they could get mad," reflects Pirlo. "It was actually a great early test – a stepping stone – because I was able to play with much older players and it made me see that football was not all fun, but also a world where you have to learn to play with other people." ▸

“CARLO ANCELOTTI ASKED ME TO GO WITH HIM TO CHELSEA BUT WHEN IT WAS TIME TO SIGN THE CONTRACT, BERLUSCONI SAID NO”

Brescia were relegated with 12 points in 1994-95 after ending the season on a run of 15 consecutive defeats, still a Serie A record. In the 13th of those, a 2-0 loss to Reggiana, Lucescu handed his protégé a senior debut two days after his 16th birthday. It wasn’t until the 1996-97 season, however, that Pirlo began to feature regularly, as Brescia won the Serie B crown. One year later, with an impressive first top-flight campaign under his belt, the 19-year-old realised a long-held dream by signing for boyhood club Inter.

The Nerazzurri went through four different managers in Pirlo’s maiden San Siro season, including Lucescu and eventually a returning Roy Hodgson, for the final six encounters of a disappointing campaign in which their new teenage playmaker struggled for game time. Pirlo and Hodgson would cross paths again at Euro 2012 when the Italian’s impudent Panenka penalty knocked out England, managed by his former boss, in the last eight.

Hodgson’s successor was Marcello Lippi, another coach with whom Pirlo would later reconnect. The young midfielder heeded his heartfelt advice to join Reggina on loan for the 1999-2000 season to pick up more first-team experience, and after registering six goals and one assist in a struggling team he returned to Inter full of vigour, only for Lippi to get the sack just one game into the new Serie A season. Pirlo could not cement a starting place under Marco Tardelli and in January 2001 he was loaned back to Brescia.

Yet returning to his former club proved to be anything but a retrograde step. Coach Carlo Mazzone already had a No.10 on his books, but believed he had found the perfect way to fit Pirlo and an ageing Roberto Baggio into the same XI.

“Mazzone phoned me to discuss this new position he had in mind, operating ahead of the defence, with Baggio playing in front of me,” remembers Pirlo. “Everything started from there. He told me that I was the ideal player for that position, because then I would always be at the centre of the game and have lots of possession. I loved the idea from the very beginning.”

Left Legends past and future who deserved a far better kit **Below** Phwoarr **Right** Robbed of the Golden Ball, but this will do instead

Pirlo would use his smooth technique and mature eye for a pass to dictate play as a deep-lying *regista*, loading the bullets for the ‘Divine Ponytail’ to fire.

“Even as an attacking midfielder, I tended to drop deeper in order to get the ball and start the play,” he explains. “I liked to have control of the game and be in possession of the ball. When you’re in midfield, you have many more options.”

It was the turning point, for Pirlo and for Brescia. Battling relegation in January, they reversed the nightmare of 1994-95 by going unbeaten in their closing 11 matches and taking points off Juventus, Inter and Milan en route to finishing eighth in Serie A. Pirlo’s sumptuous dink over the Old Lady’s midfield and defence for Baggio’s late equaliser in April 2001 was a sign of things to come. Here was a conductor, a symphony in possession fully befitting his recently acquired nickname: ‘Mozart’. Pirlo came to define the *regista* role more than any player before or since. He had found his position.

MILAN, BARÇA AND THE ULTIMATE ‘WHAT-IF’

Next, he found his club. He didn’t have to move far. Three years at Inter having brought just 22 league outings, a 22-year-old Pirlo didn’t think twice before crossing the city-and-stadium divide to join Milan.

“I mean, I didn’t play much for Inter,” he tells *FFT*. “I was looking for a new challenge and maybe I wanted to prove they were wrong in not considering me an important young player. So as soon as I had a chance to join Milan, I grasped it.

“I felt at ease from the very start because I knew a lot of the players from Italy Under-21s. It was the right move at the right time. That’s when the successful period we had over those years began.”

Things really started to gel when Carlo Ancelotti arrived in November 2001. Coach and creator formed an impregnable bond. “Pirlo,” Ancelotti once said, “spots a pass in a split-second that lesser players could spend a whole lifetime waiting to see.”

The Rossoneri qualified for the 2002-03 Champions League, which they went on to win on a crisp May evening at Old Trafford, having only scraped past Slovan Liberec to qualify for the group stage nine months earlier. In little more than a season, Milan had become a close-knit team with world-class players – that 2003 triumph was the first of three Champions League final appearances in five seasons.

“We really were a group of friends who enjoyed each other’s company and had fun together,” remembers a beaming Pirlo. “We would play the matches and then hang out together. We all loved spending time with

PIRLO BY NUMBERS

6	2	2	1	3	4	1
SERIE A	CHAMPIONS LEAGUE	UEFA SUPER CUP	CLUB WORLD CUP	COPPA ITALIA Including one as manager	SUPERCOPPA ITALIANA Including one as manager	WORLD CUP

795
2006
FUJI

each other. Even training camps wouldn't bother us. When you have a situation like that, great success will come."

The friendships Pirlo formed with his Milan team-mates were profound. He became particularly close with Alessandro Nesta, who arrived at San Siro one year after him.

"We were room-mates with both the national team and Milan for 10 consecutive years," explains Pirlo, "so we spent most of our time together. I was with him more than my own family. He was like a brother to me.

"We started playing PlayStation when Alessandro came to Milan. We loved it. As soon as we were put in the same room, we would play all of the time: before and after training sessions and at training camps. It turned into a hobby, just to kill time, because we had fun and enjoyed doing it together.

"We would never play late into the night, though – only after a game where we would struggle to fall asleep, maybe."

For Pirlo, it just relaxed him. Memorably, it was how he prepared for the biggest game of his life. "I don't feel pressure… I don't give a toss about it," he said in his autobiography. "I spent the afternoon of Sunday, July 9, 2006 in Berlin sleeping and playing the PlayStation. In the evening, I went out and won the World Cup."

This was the tournament at which Pirlo – having been reunited with his former Inter boss, Lippi – confirmed himself as one of the world's greatest midfielders. He had already sealed Italy's place in Germany by scoring two free-kicks in a 2-0 qualifying victory over Scotland. At the World Cup itself, he earned three man of the match awards, two coming in the semi-final and then the final, missing out only to the departing Zinedine Zidane as the sentimental choice for the Golden Ball.

"I wasn't sad, because the most relevant thing was to lift the World Cup trophy, so that individual prize was put to the background," says Pirlo. "Nothing else mattered."

For all of his general brilliance, Pirlo was decisive, too. He scored a long-range cracker and set up Vincenzo Iaquinta to open Italy's tournament with a 2-0 win against Ghana, assisted Fabio Grosso's extra-time goal in the Dortmund semi-final against Germany, and took the corner from which Marco Materazzi equalised in the final, before converting his spot-kick in the ensuing shootout as Italy became world champions for a fourth time.

Back home, however, joy morphed into disenchantment in a nation engulfed by the *Calciopoli* match-fixing scandal. Milan faced potential relegation – though in the end they received just an eight-point deduction for the 2006-07 Serie A season – and several clubs and players faced uncertain futures. Pirlo and many others contemplated leaving Italy.

"We had just won the World Cup, but we didn't know what would happen," says Pirlo, who was approached by a European giant that summer. "I was very, very close with Real Madrid, but then we got told that Milan could enter Champions League qualifying and be readmitted to Serie A. I was offered a new contract straight away and the club did a lot to keep me." ▸

It wouldn't be the last time that Pirlo attracted interest from the world's biggest clubs. Three years later, in 2009, Pirlo was close to following Carlo Ancelotti from Milan to Chelsea. "Ancelotti asked me to go with him," recalls the midfielder. "The two teams talked about it with my agent, and there was a big chance. But in the end, when it was time to sign the contract, Silvio Berlusconi and Adriano Galliani didn't want me to go." Milan wanted to include Branislav Ivanovic in the deal, and Chelsea flat-out refused.

The following summer, it was the turn of Pep Guardiola. The possibility that Pirlo could have played alongside Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta and Xavi in that world-conquering Barcelona team should go down in history as one of football's greatest 'what-if's. It all started with a conversation in Guardiola's office after a friendly between the two sides in late August 2010.

"He called me in and started talking about how he wanted to play and how he would like me to join his team," says Pirlo. "For me it was a source of pride, especially to talk to him and also to be compared to a Barcelona player. In the end, nothing happened, but being called by Guardiola into his office to talk was a wonderful experience."

Twelve months later, Milan's resolve to keep Pirlo finally wavered. The 32-year-old's contract was up, but the Rossoneri offered him only a one-year contract extension. And so, after a decade there, Milan's *architetto* chose to leave the club.

"I spoke with Juventus, with Roberto Mancini's Manchester City and with other big teams, but in the end I decided to go to Turin because they had a good project to get back to winning ways," he explains. "They had just gone through some tough years, but they had a new stadium and were building a new Juve, where I would be an important player, so I decided to go there."

While Milan thought that Pirlo's best days were behind him, his new team-mates knew what he could still provide.

"My first thought was, 'God exists'," said Juve keeper Gianluigi Buffon. "A player of his level and ability? Not to mention he was free! I think it was the signing of the century."

So it proved. Acquiring another epithet, *il Maestro* inspired the Old Lady to win four consecutive *scudetti* and reach the 2015 Champions League Final, their first since Pirlo's Milan beat them in 2003. Juve lost to Barça in his final appearance for the club.

"I felt that it's better to leave while you're still at the top, rather than when you might

THE ITALIANS' JOBS

Pirlo isn't the first of the Azzurri's 2006 World Cup-winning squad to enter management with mixed success

GENNARO GATTUSO

Ringhio is a one-man merry-go-round. A decade in management has taken the former enforcer to Crete, Switzerland and now Valencia; he also took Pisa up and back down, rallied Milan, won Napoli a cup, left Fiorentina after a fortnight, inspired a meme and had Spurs and Hamilton Accies reject him. "Sometimes maybe good, sometimes maybe s**t", in other words.

FILIPPO INZAGHI

Pippo entered management by returning to Milan. The result: 14 wins, 13 losses, 10th place and the sack. He recovered with back-to-back promotions at Venezia and now leads Reggina in Serie B, having worked his way through the alphabet with Bologna, Benevento and Brescia. Younger sibling Simone won 54 fewer caps but now bosses Inter, so call it evens.

FABIO CANNAVARO

Now in charge of Serie B's Benevento, the Ballon d'Or winner is back from a coaching tour of Asia that began in 2011 with his retirement at Al-Ahli. From Dubai he went to China (Guangzhou Evergrande), Saudi Arabia (Al-Nassr), back to China (second-tier Tianjin Quanjian) and then back to Guangzhou, winning the 2019 Super League. He even led China's national side for a month.

start struggling, when other people might start saying you're getting old, and when you might not be playing every game," says Pirlo.

"I preferred to leave after a Champions League final, leaving some nice memories while still playing at the highest level."

THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF PATRICK VIEIRA

"It was an exciting change," says Pirlo of his switch at the age of 36 to MLS new boys New York City FC. "It wasn't easy, because I was used to a certain level of football and playing against top teams, and I was moving to a new league without knowing too much about it. The language was new as well.

"But I have such fond memories of the three years I spent with a great club in an amazing city. It was a great experience in a football sense, even if we didn't achieve the objectives we all thought we would in those early years. In terms of the experience with my family, we had a great time as well."

It was here that Patrick Vieira – now Crystal Palace boss but then with NYCFC – began to chip away at Pirlo's anti-coaching veneer.

"Patrick is an amazing manager," says Pirlo. "Even now as a coach, I do some of the drills that he made us do in training. I really liked the way he worked and the way he wanted us to play. I learned a lot from him, both in a football sense and in terms of behaviour. He earned everyone's respect straight away.

"He had come from the Manchester City academy, where he had coached the youth teams. He brought this new methodology to New York. This way of training was new for me. It all came from City and Guardiola's world. When you're a player or a coach – or increasingly an aspiring coach, in my case – and you have someone who makes you do certain drills, you get curious. Then, when you become a coach yourself, you try to use anything that can be useful."

Pirlo has remained in touch with the man who stoked the coaching fire for him and his former NYCFC team-mate, Frank Lampard.

"When [Vieira] was with Nice," says Pirlo, "I went to meet him and see how things were going for him as a coach, but now that he's at Palace, I haven't been able to go and see him. I still have a great relationship with him and Frank, though. Frank and I used to go out for dinner together; we're still in touch now, through phone calls or messages."

They share another managerial inspiration. Both have praised Ancelotti, at Milan and Chelsea respectively, for creating a freedom of expression that gets the best from players.

"He's such an important person for me," Pirlo tells *FFT*. "He's the one who first got me playing at a very high level. He gave me a lot of responsibility and put me at the centre of a project with great players when I was in my early twenties. He trusted me from the very first day and saw something special in me. I spent eight amazing years with him. We're still in touch – he gives me advice as a coach.

"We have very similar characters. We are calm and try to solve problems by talking, not getting agitated. A coach like him can teach you a lot. I hope I took something from him."

PIRLO ARRIVED AT A CLUB THAT HAD JUST FINISHED EIGHTH IN THE TURKISH SUPER LIG FOLLOWING BACK-TO-BACK PROMOTIONS

Left A decent pick-up on a free **Above** "I had my mind set on working abroad"

The Dutch school, principally the Dream Team era of Johan Cruyff at Barça as well as Louis van Gaal's Ajax, is another influence on Pirlo's coaching.

"I loved the style of play; how they moved and covered the pitch; their game-building," reveals the Italian. "They were beautiful to watch, as both managers had a very clear method. Dutch football really helped to shape this sport. They showed the world a brand-new style of play. Even to this day, they are among the finest inspirations to managers around the world."

After enrolling in the UEFA Pro licence course in August 2019, Pirlo suddenly found himself in the hotseat at one of the biggest clubs in the world. He was still in the process of obtaining his badges in the summer of 2020 – he qualified that September – when Juventus offered him the opportunity to return to the side he had left as a player five years earlier. He couldn't turn them down. "Starting your coaching career with a team like Juventus is a very rare opportunity," he observes, "so I accepted without hesitation."

Plenty of challenges awaited him, not least because of the pandemic.

"It was quite a strange year," admits Pirlo. "The previous season had ended later than usual, so we had very little time to prepare for the new one – barely 10 days to try new systems and for the players to adapt to them. We had to work on a day-to-day basis, trying to grow and learn as we went. Even so, it was an unforgettable experience. We had a great team and we managed to achieve our goals for the season."

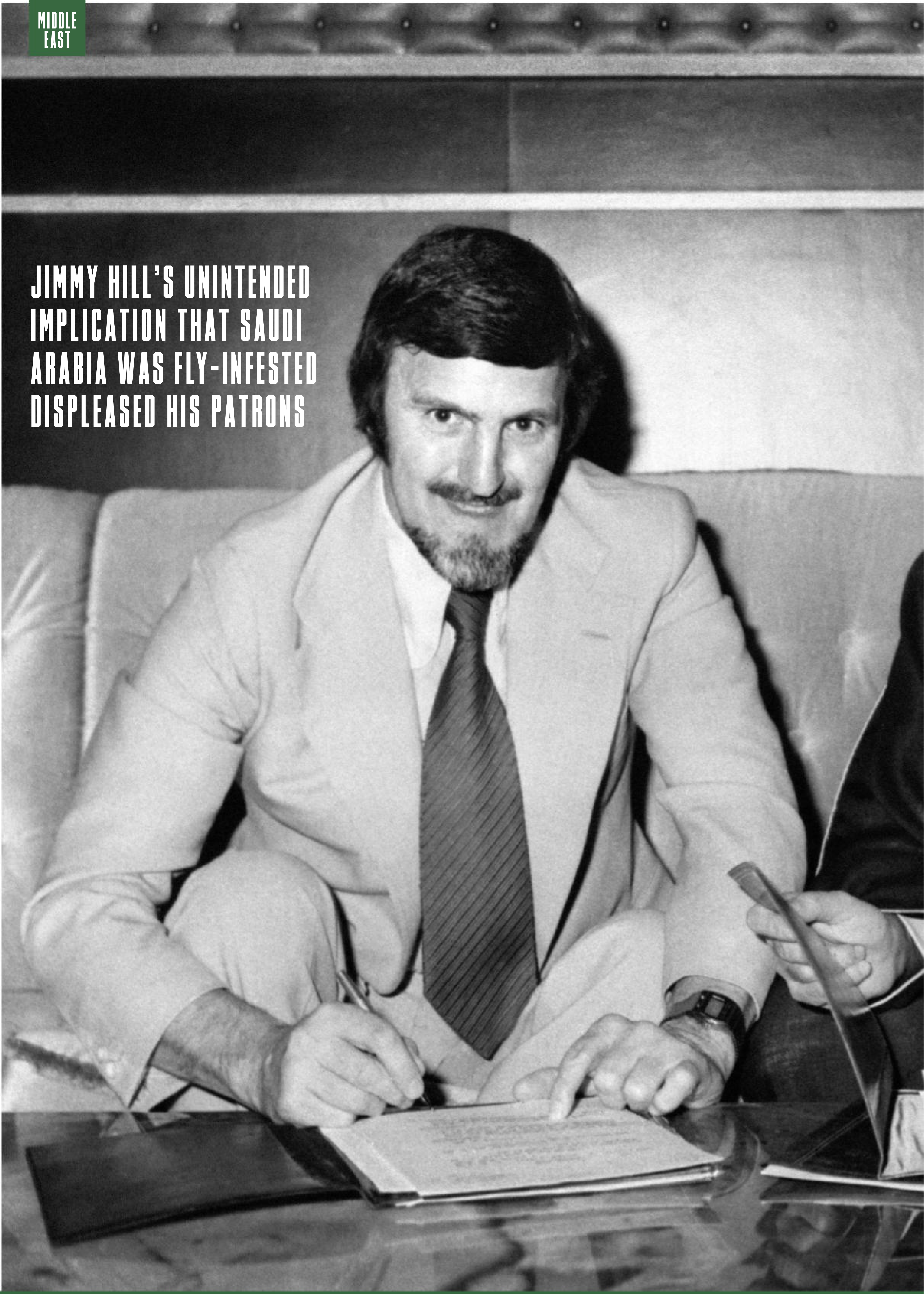
Though Juventus beat Atalanta 2-1 to lift the Coppa Italia, having also won that year's Supercoppa Italiana, Pirlo lost his job after the Old Lady's attempt at a 10th successive *scudetto* ended with them finishing fourth. "We didn't win the league," he concedes. "But we had the chance to improve for the future, so I'm glad I had that experience."

Pirlo took a year off, then arrived at Turkey's rapidly rising Fatih Karagumruk. A third-tier outfit as recently as 2019, they pulled off back-to-back promotions before finishing an impressive eighth in the Super Lig last term.

"I had many options to choose from," says Pirlo, "but I had my mind set on working abroad, in a different league, possibly in an environment where I could work without so much pressure and challenge myself with different styles of play. Football isn't exclusive to Italy or England and I was looking for a chance to really challenge myself. I wanted to get back in the game, so here I am, trying to work hard and improve.

"I'm really happy here, and I'm satisfied with how we're doing [15th when the league stopped for the World Cup]. We still have lots to improve on and that's my primary focus, because I love this sport, I love this job, and I'm always striving to push my limits."

The Italian is clearly relishing his latest adventure on the Bosporus, but one wonders what goes through his mind at every home game, because Fatih's Vefa Stadium doesn't meet Super Lig standards. Their temporary home? The Ataturk Stadium, and we all know what happened there on May 25, 2005 – Andrea Pirlo, better than most. ●



JIMMY HILL'S UNINTENDED IMPLICATION THAT SAUDI ARABIA WAS FLY-INFESTED DISPLEASED HIS PATRONS

DOUGH IN THE DESERT

Long before Saudi Arabia and Qatar invested in Newcastle and a World Cup, Gulf states lured British managers to the Middle East – and paid for it

Words Paul Simpson

Bob Paisley. Bobby Robson. Brian Clough. That was the shortlist to manage Saudi Arabia's national team in 1977. Paisley had just won the first of three European Cups with Liverpool; Robson's stylish Ipswich Town had finished third in the league; and Old Big 'Ead had returned Nottingham Forest to the top flight. With riches to match their ambition, the Saudis had already paid Jimmy Hill – broadcaster, Coventry City chairman, ex-player and self-styled football visionary – a princely £25 million to work his magic.

Saudi Arabia's quest for overnight football success in the 1970s was even more quixotic than their 2020s pursuit of Newcastle United. The kingdom had banned football until 1951 and introduced a domestic league only as late as 1976. As Hill later wrote: "The thought was that an inspirational coach, manager ▸

or messiah might help them to move up the football ladder in double-quick time."

It was a big ask, made bigger when Hill recruited former Coventry goalkeeper and future conspiracy theorist David Icke. He was, Hill said, "often tearful" and disoriented by Muslim culture, and he soon fled home.

Hill pressed on. 'The Chin', as he was semi-affectionately known, had ruled out Paisley because the Saudi national team required a younger, more tactically agile coach who was flexible enough to tolerate the players' "somewhat whimsical attitude to work rate". Incomprehensibly, Hill then hired Bill McGarry, the former Wolves boss and British football's equivalent of Windsor Davies' bellicose sergeant major in awful contemporary sitcom *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*.

McGarry, who'd been known to angrily snatch prawn cocktails out of players' hands, was infuriated by the Saudi squad's refusal to heed dietary advice. His strictures about their "lazy habits" offended officials, who counted their blessings when he departed to manage Newcastle. Stepping into McGarry's shoes was West Bromwich Albion legend Ronnie Allen, who'd steered Athletic Bilbao to second place in La Liga in 1970, but found his Saudi players' names so difficult that he addressed them by their squad numbers.

In retrospect, countries around the Persian Gulf choosing to hire a legion of British and Irish managers resembles a modest prequel to their more recent blockbuster takeovers of Manchester City and Newcastle. In the 1970s, the Gulf nations were importing expertise. Today, they export money.

Top Jimmy Hill sent the Saudis to Coventry – specifically, the national team to train with City **Above** Medical checks upon arriving in the West Midlands

Fifty years ago, football in the Gulf was a nation-building exercise driven by regional rivalries. The Saudis saw each of their regular defeats to Kuwait as a national disgrace. These days, for all of the supposed separation of state from investment fund, the acquisitions of Manchester City by the United Arab Emirates, Paris Saint-Germain by Qatar and Newcastle United by Saudi Arabia are a sporting variant of the 'edifice complex': a dictatorial regime's impulse to use grandiose public works as propaganda. Qatar's controversial hosting of the 2022 World Cup is an extreme example.

Qatar's football revolution commenced innocuously in 1975 when Frank Wignall, 35-year-old player-manager of non-league King's Lynn, called the English FA and asked, "Can you introduce me to some far, faraway country to see if they need any coaches, managers, bus drivers or anything?" Officials from the far, faraway country of Qatar, a FIFA member since 1970, duly made Wignall the national team's first foreign leader. Claiming to have initially survived a vicious assault by cockroaches at Doha airport, he enjoyed guiding Qatar and finished on a high with a 1-0 victory against Saudi Arabia, a widely-hated side who were perceived, in the words of Saudi writer Sukhdev Sandhu, as "a joyless, arrogant and wealthy juggernaut".

Meanwhile, Iran's coach – another job with Clough's name pencilled beside it – was the ex-Leicester and Manchester United gaffer Frank O'Farrell. Most weeks, the Irishman visited the Shah's imperial palace to discuss the Iranian game and sharpen the football skills of a teenaged Crown Prince Reza. He touched down shortly before Tehran hosted the Asian Games and was expected to win the football tournament. "They'd built a big stadium that could hold 120,000 fans, and the success of the whole Games depended on the football team," he recalled. A 1-0 win against Israel in the final secured gold and briefly revived the Shah's flagging popularity. Though O'Farrell left in 1976, Iran soon made it to their first World Cup in '78, embarrassing Scotland with a 1-1 draw in Argentina.

The British and Irish bosses thronging the Gulf throughout the '70s and mid-80s almost amounted to an exodus. Between 1970 and '86, more than a dozen of them took charge of a Middle Eastern national outfit – and that's just in international football. Another two British expats met when Dave Mackay, managing Al-Arabi, clinched his first league title in 1980 against a Kuwait City side led by Geoff Hurst. Others included Malcolm Allison, Billy Bingham, Joe Kinnear, Keith Burkinshaw, Danny McLennan, Jimmy Meadows and, most sensationally, Don Revie, who resigned as England supremo in 1977 and joined the UAE national team on a £340,000 tax-free four-year contract.

'Don Readies', as the tabloid press promptly renamed him, caused national outrage by quitting England for a footballing backwater – the UAE had played their first international five years earlier – that Joe Public assumed was run by the sheikhs who'd sabotaged the British economy with oil embargoes.

Oil, aka 'black gold', had made the Gulf's rulers rich beyond their imagination. It was rumoured that some of Saudi Arabia's 5,000 princes preferred to dump their new Cadillacs in the desert once the vehicles' ashtrays were full. Many of the area's affluent youngsters expressed themselves through shopping, not sport. For the sheikhs, however, football gave them a way to spread their wealth... a bit.

British coaches ended up being discarded like unwanted Cadillacs. As Saudi journalist Sandhu noted, "The outsider always gets the blame, never those born in the country. Like Bangladeshi workers cleaning the city streets, these white champs, signed to manufacture instant success, are little more than hired help." Revie and Hill would discover this when their teams faltered at the 1979 Gulf Cup.

Revie's Hollywood lifestyle in the area induced such goggle-eyed wonder among British journalists that the harsher realities of the expat manager's life – heat, insects, earthquakes, recalcitrant players, interfering princes, dodgy playing surfaces and an attitude Hill described as 'Bukra Inshallah' ('Tomorrow, God willing') – were edited out of the picture. Even so, when the Revies landed in Dubai, they were whisked away to the Intercontinental Hotel in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce and later given a villa with six bedrooms, swimming pool, cook, butler and houseboy. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nayhan – whose son, Mansour, chairs the group that acquired Manchester City – gave the Revies access to the royal family's private beach.

A year after Revie's shock move, Mackay negotiated a life-changing salary to coach Al-Arabi in Kuwait. Asked to name his price upon meeting club chairman Mohammed Al-Mulla at the Park Lane Hilton, Mackay said, "Forty thousand", writing the figure on a napkin. He got his wish, possibly because Al-Mulla was in awe of him, having cheered on Mackay & Co as Spurs won the Double in 1961 while he was a student in London. Yet, as he flew to Kuwait City, the Scot wondered, 'What have you done now, Mackay?'

His tour of Al-Arabi's facilities didn't augur well, a young club official informing Mackay, "You are very fat", but things improved. Soon he was sharing a two-bedroom flat with his assistant, Neil Martin, who did most of the cooking and all of the cleaning, and they regularly dined in palaces. At one banquet, Mackay's father, Tom, mistook a bowl of rice covered in flies for semolina and dates on top. By the time Mackay left the club of his own volition in 1986, he'd won five league titles and taken tea at the palace with Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Kuwait's ruling emir.

Gulf football was a weird parallel universe for expat managers. Referees went AWOL. Training usually happened at night; during Ramadan, it didn't start until midnight. Many footballers still trained on sand pitches.

In Dubai, Revie's dreams of becoming the 'Lawrence of soccer' received a rapid reality check. "In the very first match he attended, one team didn't turn up," said Liverpudlian manager Jimmy Melia, who was coaching nearby. "In a trial match, he was impressed by three players but they refused to come to training. Out there, you earned your money through frustration more than anything."

The paucity of talent also annoyed Revie, who once told his goalkeepers, somewhat redundantly, "You are nowhere near the level of Peter Shilton and Ray Clemence." Many footballers were also students, policemen or soldiers. Their salaries varied according to their masters' whims. Kuwaiti internationals received cars, while at the 1976 Gulf Cup, young general Saddam Hussein, enthused by Iraq's 7-1 rout of the Saudis, declared he would give every player a house if they won the final. The team's Scottish coach, Danny McLennan, recalled, "It clearly unsettled the players and we lost on penalties to Bahrain."

Cultural nuances could prove hazardous. Asked by a TV reporter about Saudi football, Hill interrupted the question to swat away a fly. The implication that Saudi Arabia was fly-infested, and swatting away flies more important than its football, did not impress his patrons. Neither did a stray remark by one of Hill's colleagues that British players worked harder – tantamount, said critics, to calling Saudi footballers genetically inferior.

Hill and his cohort became scapegoats whenever the Green Falcons played poorly. Unable to make the squad perform well above their ability, Hill and David Woodfield – McGarry's former assistant, who succeeded Allen as the team's coach – prepared for the 1979 Gulf Cup in Iraq with trepidation.

Revie was more optimistic, at least until an earthquake struck the hotel at the UAE's training camp in Egypt, forcing the manager and his squad to eat and sleep on the bus. As a deeply superstitious man, devoted to his 'lucky' blue suit but mortified by porcelain elephants, Revie would not have seen this as the most positive of signs.

The Gulf Cup's seven finalists – the majority overseen by Englishmen – played each other once, with the group winner lifting the cup. The second fixture pitted Woodfield and Hill's Saudi Arabia against Revie's UAE. Hill had secretly sounded out Revie about managing the Saudis after the tournament and must have taken heart from their battling 2-1 win.

Below Mackay shows off his silverware to the Al-Arabi fans **Bottom** Revie's 1977 resignation as England boss to lead the UAE caused outrage

The UAE, meanwhile, endured a string of defeats: 2-1 to Saudi Arabia, 3-0 to Bahrain, 1-0 to Qatar, 5-0 to Iraq and, worst of all, 7-0 to Kuwait. A win in their final match against Oman provided no consolation. It was all too much for Abu Dhabi TV's commentator, who declared, "Don't blame the players; blame Revie and his management." His humiliated bosses did just that and fired Revie, but with the face-saving excuse that they wanted a Middle Eastern head honcho – ex-Iran chief Heshmat Mohajerani – for political reasons.

Revie had distracted and demotivated his squad with dithering about roles and tactics. He was right, however, to insist that it would take a decade to develop footballers capable of reaching a major competitive finals. Ten years later, the UAE qualified for the 1990 World Cup in Italy. They lost all three group games, conceding 11 goals.

Saudi Arabia's '79 Gulf Cup wasn't quite that bad, bringing a third-placed finish, but FA president Prince Faisal bin Fahd Al Saud took umbrage when his favourite star, Majid Abdullah, was dropped for their final game against Iraq. Hill and Woodfield refused to reinstate the talented yet inconsistent striker after he missed an open goal in a 0-0 draw with Kuwait, and paid the price as the hosts won 2-0 to clinch the trophy. The memory of Abdullah's header spinning over the Kuwaiti crossbar haunted Hill for years to come.

Revie was hired by Dubai club Al-Nasr and then mysteriously fired in 1984 with his team third in the league. His assistant, Eric Smith, revealed, "We didn't ask why. You can ask the sheikh but he won't give you a reason." Revie duly swapped the UAE for Egypt to manage Al-Ahly. Ironically, his autobiography, written as a player and published in 1955, had been titled *The Happy Wanderer*.

The surest way to be sacked was to lose a local derby, especially the world-renowned Cairo Derby, as Mackay discovered in 1993 at Zamalek. Two league titles in two campaigns counted for nothing when the Egyptian giants were dispatched 3-0 by Al-Ahly, their sworn enemies. Asked to decipher the heavy loss, in which Zamalek's centre-half had been sent off early, he told the directors, "Simple. They had 11 men and we had 10." Curtly informed that this was insufficient, Mackay shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe this gesture had some rude significance in Egypt that had passed me by," he later mused, "because they got really angry and I lost my job."

These managers left precious little legacy. Although Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE all subsequently qualified for World Cups, with Qatar now joining the list as hosts, such success owes as much to the British troops who introduced football to the natives in the 1940s as it does to Hill, Mackay, Revie & Co. The region's domestic leagues remain marooned in mediocrity, producing few local heroes and with wildly varying attendances.

Perhaps the result of this 1970s experiment explains the Gulf states' exorbitant spending on football overseas this century. Is there a point in building expensive edifices at home if nobody takes any notice?

Beth Mead hated herself. She despised the thoughts that had crossed her mind, but felt powerless to stop them.

England's would-be Euro 2022 hero had been left out of Great Britain's squad for the delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympics and it had sent her into a spiral like nothing she had experienced before.

Stuck at home as Team GB travelled to Japan to take part in 2021's rearranged Games, Mead found herself locked in a paradox. She wanted the side to do well in the tournament but, at the same time, she hoped they would fall short in their quest for a medal, so that manager Hege Riise would regret overlooking her.

"I found it very hard, because I hated the thoughts I was having while the Olympics were being played," the 27-year-old tells *FourFourTwo* now. "I wanted the girls to do well, but I also didn't, because of Hege.

"I found myself thinking thoughts I never thought I would. But I feel most players in that position would think exactly the same; it's just whether they admit it or not. ▸

WOULD LAST SEASON HAVE HAPPENED IF I HAD GONE TO THE OLYMPICS? SOME THINGS HAPPEN FOR A REASON

Twelve months after being overlooked in Tokyo for being "too aggressive", Beth Mead led England to glory at Euro 2022 as the tournament's best player. As she tells *FFT*, you really should like her when she's angry...

Words Chris Evans

“Reflecting on it now, how I felt was quite normal under the circumstances. There was no malice towards anyone else who was part of that team. But it was tough.”

In truth, it wasn’t a big surprise that Mead hadn’t been selected. Riise had overlooked the forward for a couple of previous England squads while the Norwegian doubled up as Lionesses interim and Great Britain manager before Sarina Wiegman’s impending arrival in September 2021 – not that it made the rejection any easier for Mead.

To escape those dark feelings, the Arsenal forward took her mind off what was going on in Japan, taking only a passing interest in the Olympics and busying herself with trips to watch the men’s European Championship and Wimbledon tennis tournament. But even as Team GB lost 4-3 in extra time to Australia in an epic quarter-final tussle, she bristled with frustration at the thought of how she could have made a difference.

As the new 2021-22 season began, Mead had a choice. Instead of letting anger and injustice consume her, she channelled both as motivation to prove her doubters wrong.

A little over a year later, she was the toast of the nation. Mead smashed six goals and assisted five en route to winning the Golden Boot and Player of the Tournament awards as England lifted the European Championship trophy, the country’s first major title – men’s or women’s – since 1966 and all that. She obliterated Jimmy Greaves’ 13-goal single-season scoring record for England, set back in 1960-61, by plundering a scarcely credible 20 in 2021-22, including four hat-tricks. To top off her annus mirabilis, she came second in the 2022 Ballon d’Or Feminin and UEFA Women’s Player of the Year rankings behind Barcelona’s Alexia Putellas, before winning the BBC Women’s Footballer of the Year prize.

Point proved, then. Now Mead can reveal not just the why, but the how.

FOOTBALL AS A FIRST LOVE

Beth Mead is no stranger to blocking out the naysayers. Growing up in Whitby, North Yorkshire, the football-mad adolescent was used from a young age to being the subject of ridicule. Her crime? Being a girl in a junior league almost exclusively made up of boys.

Every weekend as she fastened her boots, the small girl with long blonde hair naturally stood out. Mead more than held her own on the pitch, but that didn’t stop a deluge of disparaging comments and jokes being made within her earshot – and her dad’s.

“As a kid, you think less and you don’t worry about all of the outside noise,” she tells *FFT*. “When I heard boys or parents laughing on the side of the pitch as I came on, I knew that I had the full belief of my team-mates, their parents and my parents.

“My dad told me that some people will always have opinions, and that I would hear a few things, but he said, ‘You don’t need to say anything, Beth, and neither do I – your football will do the talking’. After most games, I’d earned a lot of respect from teams and from parents for getting stuck in and playing well. Just because I was a girl running around with a ponytail didn’t make me any different to those boys.”

If having thick skin is a prerequisite for Mead, then so is her passion for the sport. It would have been easy for the childhood Manchester United fan to stick to watching football and instead pursue one of several other sports she tried as a youngster. Yet, while ballet classes, cross-country running, netball and hockey may have offered her the opportunity to consider other activities, they didn’t really compare.

“I tried a lot of sports and enjoyed being active and joining in different things, though football always hit me different,” says Mead. “I loved what I was doing on the pitch and had no other worry in the world – nothing else mattered except me kicking that football.

“That’s still my way of switching off now: just running around on a football pitch and loving what I’m doing. That’s never changed, from the six-year-old kid to the 27-year-old who’s running around now.

“Football is my first love; my one true love. It still breaks my heart sometimes, but that’s part and parcel of the game.”

Top to bottom The PFA Young Women’s Player of the Year; BBC Women’s Footballer of the Year; Euro 2022 best player, top goalscorer and champion… this girl can, all right

The fruit of Mead’s love was goals. After joining up with local team California Girls, the 10-year-old hotshot couldn’t stop finding the back of the net. It wasn’t too long before she had caught the eye of Middlesbrough’s Centre of Excellence, where the scoring continued.

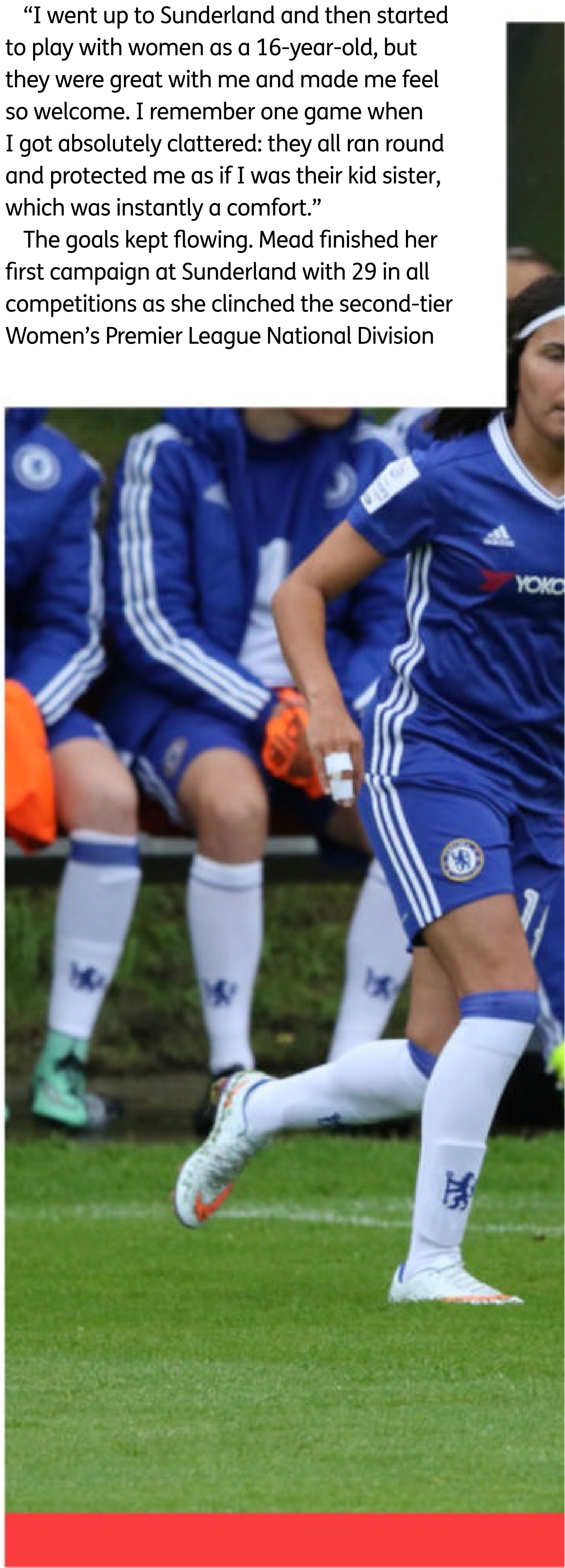
It required a 45-minute drive along country roads to reach Boro’s academy from home, but accompanied by her dad’s cassettes playing Madness, Queen and The Clash, the journeys would fly by. It was a good job, too, because as Mead turned 16, those trips were only going to get longer, due to Sunderland showing an interest in recruiting the young striker to their programme.

The Black Cats had a strong reputation for developing young female players in the region, but an initially reticent Mead needed some convincing from her parents to move out of her comfort zone. She would be leaving age-group football in order to play in the senior team – a teenager finding her way among adults.

“I was very lucky that I had my mum and dad, who always pushed me past my limits to the point they made me better,” explains Mead. “If I had made those decisions, I may have held myself back.

“I went up to Sunderland and then started to play with women as a 16-year-old, but they were great with me and made me feel so welcome. I remember one game when I got absolutely clattered: they all ran round and protected me as if I was their kid sister, which was instantly a comfort.”

The goals kept flowing. Mead finished her first campaign at Sunderland with 29 in all competitions as she clinched the second-tier Women’s Premier League National Division



Golden Boot, before raising the bar higher still the next year with 30 goals in 28 games.

Mead's exploits were getting noticed, and not just in the women's game. When another prolific goalscorer moved to the Stadium of Light in 2015, he was keen to find out more about the teenager who was earning all of the plaudits on Wearside.

"Jermain Defoe was amazing with me," says Mead with a smile as she looks back at her meeting of minds with the ex-England hitman. "We were lucky to share breakfast and lunch in the same canteen as the men's team, which was very nice – it's something Sunderland got right from day one.

"He literally waited for me every morning. He heard about me being this great striker, so he wanted to know everything about me because he wasn't the only great striker at Sunderland at the time. We got on really well, talking about football every morning while he had a green tea.

"He had watched a few of my goals and said, 'I've never scored one like that before – what were you thinking when you did that?' I would always explain, but he understood that strikers have to be quite instinctive in things you do.

"We're quite similar characters in a sense – we're quite outgoing and extroverted. We bounced off each other. We stay in touch to this day, and he's always supported me and shared his experience to help me with what I'm doing in my career."

> "I WANTED TO STOP BEING A BRAT, BECAUSE I'M NOT THE ONLY NO.9 TO EVER BE PUSHED OUT TO THE WING"

"*TOO* AGGRESSIVE IF ANYTHING, CLIVE"

For all of Defoe's guidance, though, his own links to north London might have meant he didn't approve of Mead's next big decision.

Arsenal are the most successful English club in the women's game and represented a move to the big time for Mead, who had continued to tear apart defences even after Sunderland won promotion from WSL2 into the top division for the 2015 season. Yet the striker's initial answer was no.

Rather than make the long move south, she decided to remain in the North East for another campaign, turning professional with Sunderland for their first season in the newly formed WSL1. She also completed the final year of her sports development degree at Teesside University.

"It was a gamble, to say the least," recalls Mead. "It was a tough decision – one I sat down and talked to my mum and dad about. It wasn't a case of getting out of my comfort zone at the time, because I knew the quality of players that Arsenal had. I hadn't had any exposure to WSL1, so I thought it was more important to be playing regularly in the top league, and I'd get more of an opportunity to do that at Sunderland than Arsenal."

Mead's decision was proved emphatically right. Despite suffering a car accident midway through the campaign when she swerved to avoid a deer, the 20-year-old registered 12 goals in 14 league games to top the scoring charts in her debut top-flight season. Her dozen strikes included a goal in both games ▸

Below Mead chose to stay at the club for Sunderland's WSL1 debut

against the Gunners, which kept her firmly on the radar of Arsenal's Spanish manager Pedro Martinez Losa.

So, it was no surprise when Martinez Losa got in touch with Mead again at the end of the following campaign to see if she would reconsider joining the north Londoners. This time, in January 2017, Mead's reply was yes.

The honeymoon period didn't last long, though. Within months of joining Arsenal, Mead was shifted out to the wing as Dutch goal sensation Vivianne Miedema arrived from Bayern Munich.

Despite Mead's initial dissatisfaction at having to learn a new position, Miedema's acquisition proved to be significant. The duo eventually hit it off – on and off the pitch. The pair are now dating, while the positional switch reawakened the resilience that has become the England forward's calling card.

"I wanted to stop being a brat, because I'm not the only person it happens to," says Mead, of being asked to play in a different position for the benefit of the team. "I'd been a No.9 for most of my career, and then I was pushed out to the wing because another No.9 came in. I was like, 'I've scored as many goals as her this year'. It felt a bit unfair – but it was another one of those life lessons.

"I was given my first England cap because I could play on the wing. It brought different elements to my game, and I'm effective as a winger because I understand from my own experience what a No.9 really wants. There are pros and cons to every situation. I'm very much about having a positive outlook on bad situations now, and I made good on what I felt was a bad situation. I worked extremely hard and tried to nail down the position that I still play today."

Inside 12 months, she was summoned to be part of Phil Neville's England squad for the 2019 World Cup qualifiers and came off the bench to make her debut in a 0-0 draw with Wales. The moment had been years in the making and made up for the forward's only previous call-up, in 2015, when she felt she was an afterthought in the plans of Neville's predecessor, Mark Sampson.

Neville saw Mead as anything but a bit-part player. The former Manchester United and Everton utility man quickly identified how to get the most out of his new star.

Part of Neville's plan for Mead to reach her potential was to harness her energy and aggression, key components of her game. Victory at the 2019 SheBelieves Cup – which included an angled match-winning strike from Mead to defeat Brazil – and a last-four spot at the World Cup suggested things were on the right path.

However, following England's agonising semi-final exit to the United States, a sharp downturn in form of seven reverses in 11 games spelled the end for Neville in January 2021 – his temporary replacement, Riise, then turned Mead's world on its head when she branded the winger as "too aggressive" and left her out of that summer's squad to compete for Olympic gold.

"That's what I struggled most with," says Mead, whose mother was diagnosed with cancer at around the same time. "To this day, I get told that my aggression can be the best part of my game and to use it in the right manner on the pitch, so to be told that [by Riise] was the opposite.

"Phil [Neville] always told me he wanted to annoy the hell out of me before every game so that I'd run on the pitch and be an angry person; for the next manager to come in and tell me I was too aggressive... I struggled to take that. I struggled to understand it. It was a frustrating one, to say the least."

RESPECT
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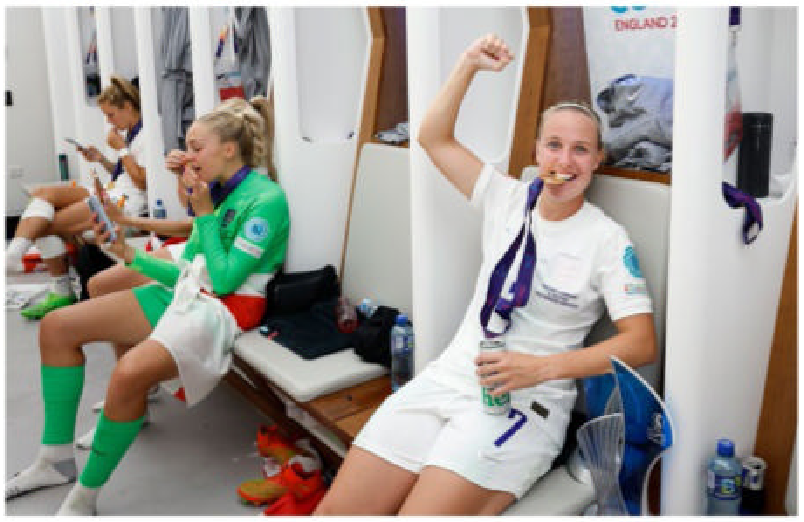
SARINA'S MAGIC

The injustice lit a fire beneath Mead.

"It wasn't the fact that I wasn't selected; it was the non-clarity and poor decisions behind that," she continues, fixing her gaze dead ahead. "But it happened, and maybe, looking at the season I just had, would that have happened if I'd gone to the Olympics? Some things happen for a reason."



Clockwise from below left Top Gunner; Mead and Miedema – name a more iconic pair; no more years of hurt; giving the Lionesses lift off in their opener; tasting victory

Mead's numbers throughout the 2021-22 campaign would have been impossible to ignore. She had 19 goal involvements in the WSL, with 11 goals and a league-high eight assists as Arsenal finished second; they were the only English side to reach the Champions League quarter-finals. Even more impressive were her underlying stats, topping the WSL charts in several creativity metrics including key passes, big chances created and shot-creating actions per 90 minutes.

Mead was flying by the time the England squad came together for Euro 2022, having scored 14 international goals already that season before the tournament kicked off.

"As a confidence player, it helps to hear nice things sometimes," she says, smiling. "You want to be perfect as a footballer and it's never going to happen, but you can push yourself to be the best you can be. I knew I had more to give, and in the season just gone I performed more consistently rather than having good matches here and there.

"WHEN CHLOE SCORED, IT WAS AS IF MY DEAD LEG WAS INSTANTLY HEALED: I JUMPED THE BARRIERS"

"I just felt great during the tournament and was loving what I was doing, which showed out on the pitch. When you get opportunities in front of goal, it doesn't always happen, but this tournament it seemed to happen and the chances kept going in the back of the net – I'm incredibly grateful."

It took only 16 minutes for the Lionesses' leading light to notch the opening goal of the tournament, grabbing the winner at Old Trafford in the hosts' curtain-raiser against Austria, which Mead describes as the side's "most nervous game". Even though they won only 1-0, it set the tone for the competition.

England followed that narrow victory with another 13 goals in their next two group games: an extraordinary 8-0 demolition of Norway in which Mead bagged a hat-trick, then a 5-0 win against Northern Ireland in which she added another goal to her tally.

Opponents became considerably tougher in the knockout stages.

"We had quite a hard run," says Mead. "We played Spain [in the quarter-finals] who are an unbelievable team in possession and very hard to get near, so I knew it was going to be hard. Another year, we could easily have crumbled at 1-0 down. This time, we had full trust and understanding in each other as a team, and we knew we were capable of doing and giving more. And that we did."

Ella Toone's equaliser and then Georgia Stanway's extra-time rocket sealed a brilliant England turnaround. In the semi-finals they had another shaky start, yet Mead was on hand to settle the nerves again by scoring the opener in a 4-0 victory against Sweden.

The country was at fever pitch, especially with the prospect of facing Germany in the showpiece, but Mead explains that manager Sarina Wiegman made the difference with her ability to not let that affect the players.

"I don't know how she does it – we think she's a genius," beams Mead. "She has such an effect on you as a person and as a team. She's direct: you know where you stand, you know your responsibilities, and you know the way we play as a team.

"Throughout the Euros, she kept us humble and out of the limelight, keeping us in our family bubble of the team. She made us feel calm even though everywhere else was so pumped and excited.

"Even in the changing room ahead of the final, she told us, 'We don't have to win but we really want to, and today is just another game of football, though of course it has a lot riding on it. We're playing a game that we love and we have to go out and enjoy it the best we can'."

For once, it wasn't Mead who hogged the headlines. Having come off with a dead leg shortly after Toone had given the Lionesses a second-half lead, Mead had to watch the rest of the final from the bench as Germany equalised to force extra time – and as her replacement, Chloe Kelly, netted the decisive goal with less than 10 minutes remaining.

"It was shocking – I'm not good at being on the sidelines and sitting on the bench," says Mead, laughing. "When Chloe's goal went in, it was if my dead leg was instantly healed – I jumped over the barriers and went on to the pitch to celebrate with her. From then on, every time Germany got past the halfway line, I was very nervous and edgy."

When the final whistle sounded, the party could get started.

Mead had been propelled into the world's attention, picking up her personal accolades before getting her hands on the European Championship trophy. Being recognised by fans has become commonplace, with TV appearances and interviews turning her into one of the country's most recognisable footballers – even if she was unfortunately captioned as partner Miedema's 'guest' on the Ballon d'Or red carpet. Mead soon learned the pitfalls of being well-known, though: an innocent holiday walk abroad descended into a swarm of selfie-hunters wanting to secure a shot with England's latest national treasure. Life has changed.

From that ordinary little girl with a blonde ponytail who had to ignore the sniggers of her opponents just to play the game she loved, Mead is now on top of the world. She'll fight back from a serious knee injury suffered in late November, too. It's what she does.

"This year, I just stripped everything back," she concludes. "We speak about pressure on people, but six-year-old Beth played football because she loved playing football, so why shouldn't 27-year-old Beth do that as well?"

We could all learn from that lesson.

THE CLOWN PRINCE

One North East club tried to spend their way to the very top after the Second World War, spearheaded by one of football's first mavericks. Len Shackleton, a British record signing from rivals Newcastle, would become an all-time great at Sunderland – even if controversy was rarely far away

Words Richard Edwards

“TWENTY-ONE PLAYERS WERE TRANSFIXED AS HE DID HIS TRICKS, BUT WHERE DID IT GET US?”

It's October 5, 1946, and the North East is adjusting to life in the aftermath of a conflict that has decimated the region. Strict rationing remains in place for the people of Newcastle, with bread being added to a list that already includes margarine, tea, cheese and bacon.

Neither has the supply of goals been overflowing at St James' Park. Newcastle United have won three of their first eight games in the Second Division, scoring 10 fewer goals than Barnsley at the top. Times by the Tyne are hard and the city's beloved team isn't doing much to alleviate the pain. But things are about to change.

That afternoon, the Magpies would give debuts to two new signings: former pitman Charlie Wayman and an Arsenal youth team reject by the name of Len Shackleton, recruited from Bradford (Park Avenue) for a fee of £13,000. Newport County, visitors to St James', had no idea what was about to hit them. Before long, Newcastle had triumphed 13-0 and Shackleton had bagged a double hat-trick.

His first goal, an outrageous chip over the head of the hapless Newport goalkeeper, best summed up the contribution of a player whose dominance, according to the city's *Sunday Sun* newspaper, turned Newcastle's display into "more of a show than a Second Division football match". It was a prescient observation, too. With Shackleton, the show often overtook pretty much everything else.

Leonard Francis Shackleton was born in Bradford 100 years ago. The son of a painter and decorator, Shackleton saw the football pitch as a blank canvas on which he could demonstrate skills that few players in English football could match, either before or since.

He was arguably England's first freestyle footballer. Sometimes he unveiled his box of tricks to entertain the crowd. On other occasions, he would use his full repertoire of magic to humiliate his own team-mates, playing passes with so much spin that the ball was impossible to control.

It's little wonder, either, that Jackie Milburn – a team-mate when Shackleton made his virtuoso debut against Newport – said that, talented as he was, Newcastle would "win nowt with him in the team". Suspicions over a man who would become known as the 'Clown Prince' were magnified among those charged with selecting the England team.

But to understand how much Shackleton was a breath of fresh air, it is necessary to appreciate the austere environment from which he emerged. The initial thrill that accompanied the end of the Second World War quickly faded. Under the leadership of Labour's Clement Attlee, who had defeated Winston Churchill by a landslide margin in the General Election of July 1945, the nation faced crippling debts and a rebuilding job unlike any other in its history.

Above "Duke of Gloucester, this is an honour... pull my finger" **Below** Just out of shot are 10 opposition men chasing thin air

By the time the Football League resumed in August 1946, the desire for entertainment was at an all-time high, and so was the desire for entertainers. Yet the 24-year-old Shackleton started the campaign with Park Avenue, mid-table in the Second Division.

He had shone in wartime football, having also had a brief spell in the RAF and worked down the mines as a Bevin Boy, the name given to conscripts charged with boosting the UK's coal production. When the country's top players returned from national service, however, there were doubts about whether he would be able to cut it against the best.

In April 1946, he had been handed his England debut in a makeshift team for an unofficial encounter against Scotland at Hampden Park, playing at inside left in a side that featured both Tommy Lawton and Billy Wright. But the Three Lions lost 1-0 in front of 139,000 people, with Scotland's winning goal coming from a free-kick that Shackleton had conceded on the edge of the penalty area, and there wasn't a clamour for him to win a second cap any time soon.

"I was out, and not until three years later was it decided that I had paid the appropriate penance for my soccer sins," he would later recollect. Not that he was any stranger to rejection. When Arsenal released him shortly before the war, he was too ashamed to tell his friends back home in Yorkshire, so he stayed in the capital and played a season for London Paper Mills.

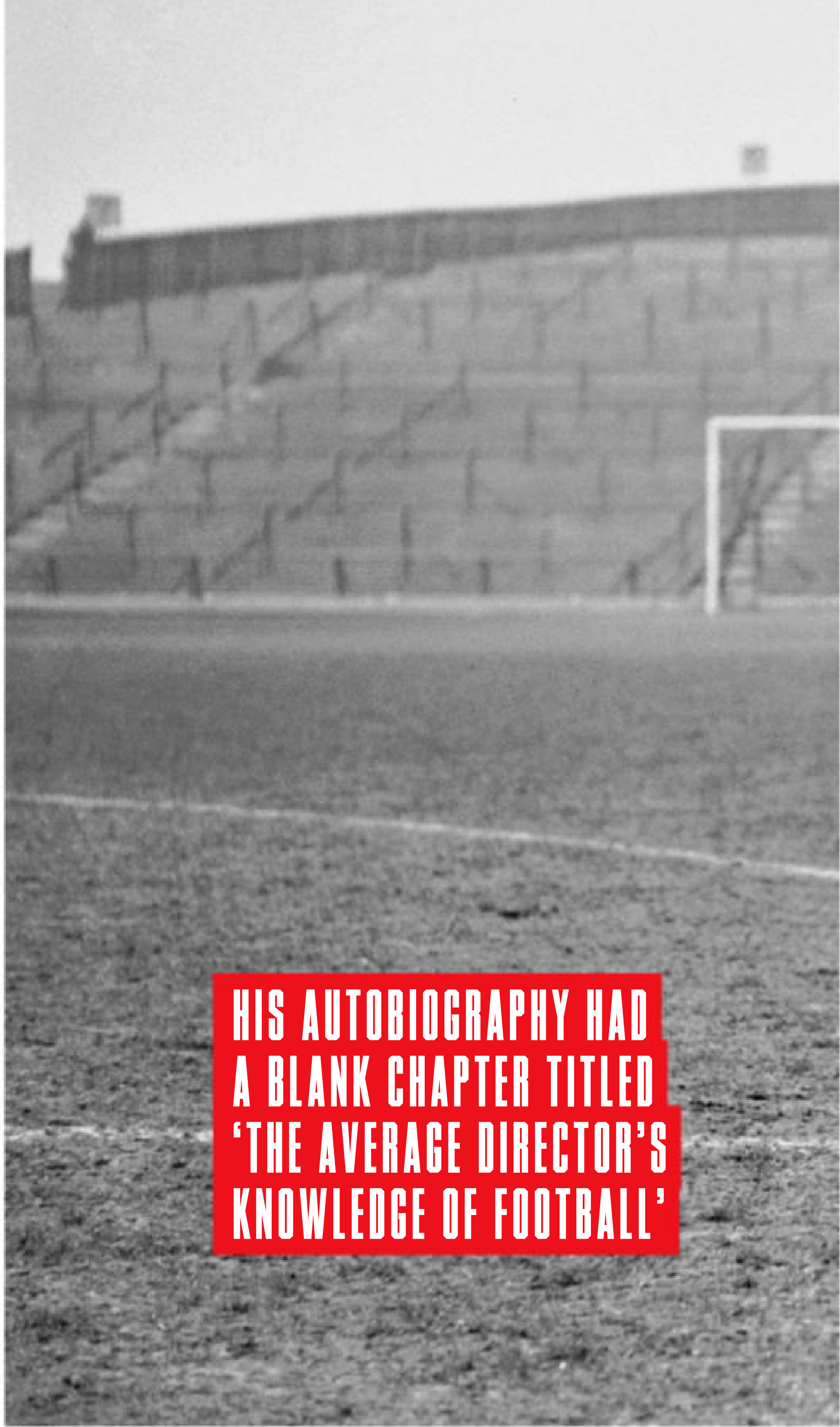
Precious little fever greeted Shackleton's arrival when Newcastle swooped in to sign him from Park Avenue: his goal-hoarding debut against Newport drew 9,000 fewer supporters than the club's previous home match against Burnley. Quickly, though, he won over the fanbase, becoming so widely known that he even escaped a kidnap threat from local students, following a brief dispute between the football club and the nearby King's College. To avert the threat, three of Shackleton's team-mates escorted him from his hotel to St James' Park for a game against Manchester City, guarding the changing room door until the players took to the pitch ready for kick-off.

The forward netted 29 goals in 64 games for Newcastle, but by February 1948, with United still stuck in the second tier, the club's directors saw Shackleton's predilection for showboating as tiresome over titillating. On the day they ordered him in to inform him that he was being sold, he kept his employers waiting in order to complete a full round of golf, before eventually making his way over to St James' Park.

An auction was held for Shackleton's services. Covering the event was the *Evening Standard*'s football reporter, Harold Palmer, who claimed that the player's form in the North East had captured the attention of his former club, Arsenal, and their manager Tom Whittaker. "If Arsenal buy Len Shackleton, international inside forward, it will be one of the most remarkable transfers ever – a club paying £16,000 to buy back a player they let go nearly eight years ago," wrote Palmer. What would he have made of Paul Pogba's £93 million return to Manchester United, or Romelu Lukaku's £97m reunion with Chelsea?

In the end, with all of the bidding clubs gathered inside Newcastle's County Hotel, it was Sunderland who saw off competition from the Gunners, Portsmouth, Liverpool and Bolton, keeping Shackleton in the North East and flicking the Vs at their nearest rivals.

"Sunderland will bring the costliest attack in football to play Arsenal at Highbury on Saturday," reported the *Evening Standard* in February 1949, trumpeting a forward line which cost an eye-watering sum of £53,000: Shackleton, signed for a British record fee of £20,050, linking up with Ivor Broadis, Ronnie Turnbull and Jackie Robinson. Broadis, who cost £18,000, was Carlisle's player-manager before his move to Wearside and effectively agreed to sell himself. He was replaced in



HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY HAD A BLANK CHAPTER TITLED 'THE AVERAGE DIRECTOR'S KNOWLEDGE OF FOOTBALL' the Brunton Park dugout by a 35-year-old first-time manager named Bill Shankly.

Shackleton was the star attraction in that Sunderland outfit. His one-twos with the corner flag, and the occasional rest while he sat on the ball, earned him the 'Clown Prince' moniker that would stay with him – and to some extent haunt him – for the remainder of his career. On one occasion, with his side in the lead and only a few minutes left on the clock, he put his foot on the ball and pretended to comb his hair while looking at an imaginary wristwatch.

Much like some of Shackleton's marauding and bewitching runs, Sunderland were going places. Nicknamed the 'Bank of England Club' by those who could only dream of the kind of transfer fees that were being splashed by the Roker Park hierarchy, they were casting aside years of mediocrity in a new challenge to the balance of power in English football.

For the early part of the 1950s, Sunderland and Shackleton were undeniably box-office. Their approach was not universally popular, however. As Shackleton explained in his autobiography: "From Plainmoor to Pittodrie, football's Land's End and John O'Groats, the Sunderland manager Billy Murray and his free-spending directors were abused; they were accused of attempting to buy the honours of the game with a cheque book." Later, some creative ways of circumventing maximum wage regulations came to light, leading to fines and bans for members of the club's board.

With their enviable array of talent and a star player viewed as a deity, Sunderland were cheered on by home crowds reaching as high as 68,000. And yet, as Milburn had predicted, the club won "nowt".

During the 1949-50 season, Shackleton did inspire Sunderland to finish within a point of the title. Only a home defeat to Manchester City in mid-April – a lone blot on their Roker Park copybook that campaign – denied them the chance to leapfrog eventual champions Portsmouth and runners-up Wolves, in one of the closest title races on record.

But despite his manifest brilliance helping him to bag 100 goals in 348 appearances for Sunderland, Shackleton is held up as a reason that era ended trophyless. An FA Cup final against Newcastle was on the cards in 1955, only for Manchester City (again) to inflict semi-final defeat on the Rokerites, who then had to watch their neighbours lift the trophy. Murray's expensive project faltered after that.

"Shackleton is among the immortals as a ball-player," wrote his team-mate, Trevor Ford. "For him, clowning seems just as much a part of the game as scoring goals."

Ford had joined Sunderland from Aston Villa for £30,000 in 1950, setting a British transfer record, though he was frequently infuriated by Shackleton. David Taylor wrote in the *Guardian:* "Almost everyone involved in football admired the big, bustling Welsh centre-forward, but not Shackleton, who took delight in providing Ford with impossible backspin passes and sliced through-balls which showed up his limitations."

It left Ford frustrated that Shackleton's talents had been misdirected. "Twenty-one other players on the field were transfixed as Shack did tricks with the ball, the likes of which I'd never seen before," he revealed. "It was the clowning Shack at his best, but where did it get us? Precisely nowhere."

Shackleton's England career went the same way. One of the most skilful players of his generation won just five caps and never played at a World Cup. His final appearance came against reigning champions West Germany in December 1954: he scored with an impudent chip to put the seal on a 3-1 win at Wembley, but that was that.

Walter Winterbottom, England's manager in that period, outlined the issues involved when it came to putting trust in Shackleton's wayward genius. "With his touch, his brain, his marvellous anticipation, he should have been one of the greats," said Winterbottom. "The trouble was that he only wanted to play the game his way: purely for fun."

If Shackleton had been born in Brazil rather than Bradford, things may have turned out very differently, but his approach to authority probably would have landed him in hot water wherever he ended up. A review of his autobiography bemoaned that he had used it primarily to air grievances over perceived injustices that he had suffered in his career. Famously, a chapter entitled 'The Average Director's Knowledge of Football' consisted of a single blank page. "Remembering the richness of Shackleton's character and his great skill," wrote the *Guardian*, "one cannot help regretting that this, the only official autobiography of the Grimaldi of our football world, should read so much like a catalogue of his grudges."

However, he was hardly alone in thinking that footballers were worth more than they were being paid, particularly given the huge crowds that poured through the turnstiles to watch them. In his book, *Clown Prince of Soccer?: The Len Shackleton Story*, Colin Malam explains how the player complained bitterly of being paid £50 to play for England when the match itself would generate an almost certain £50,000. It was, he argued, Shackleton's misfortune to perform in an era when playing football professionally was regarded as reward enough, with financial benefits viewed largely as a bonus.

It would be five years until the minimum wage was scrapped. By then, Shackleton had hung up his boots and begun a second career as a journalist. Nothing, though, would ever replace the thrill he got from beating a man and, when the mood took him, going back and beating him again.

His was a unique talent – Len Shackleton won nowt but the hearts of thousands.

AROUND THE GROUNDS

EFL • NON-LEAGUE • SCOTLAND

INTERVIEW

FREDDIE WOODMAN

The English gloveman swapped the Toon for Preston this summer to play more. He reveals his goalkeeping idol and why he keeps a diary...

Interview Paul McNamara

You started this season with seven straight league clean sheets. Was there a sense of disbelief when Birmingham scored in game eight?
I wasn't too fussed. You have to accept you can concede at any moment, or your judgement becomes clouded. We lost that game 1-0, but a few weeks later went to Norwich and won 3-2. I'd prefer that over a clean sheet – wins drive you further up the table. That said, conceding isn't nice. I don't like the noise of the ball hitting the net or seeing balls in the goal during training. I hate the ball going in the goal, at all.

You kept 20 clean sheets and won the Championship's Golden Glove award on loan at Swansea in 2020-21. What came together that season?
A lot, especially in the Championship, where anyone can beat anyone. You need a strong defence and a well-drilled team. It sounds cliché, but it's essential to defend from the front. Plus, a bit of luck. I've never known anything like the start of this season, though. Once I'd equalled the three in a row I achieved at Swansea, I was saying, 'It can't happen again, can it?' But it just kept happening again and again. It became a joke in the dressing room: 'Crikey, we've got another one'.

You've had six loans in the past eight years. Is such upheaval frustrating?
As a young goalie, if you go into the manager's office saying you think you should be his No.1, he's going to say, 'But you've not played much'. I went back to Newcastle after two years and nearly 100 matches under my belt for Swansea, and it was a very different conversation. I knew I'd need to move on if I wanted to play properly. I'm blessed that my dad was a goalie, too – it's such a unique position. We have to be perfect. Outfield players can make 10 mistakes. If we make one, it's a goal. Going out on loan allows you to grow your resilience against that.

Your dad, Andy, played more than 400 Football League games before becoming a coach. Last season he guided Bromley to FA Trophy glory, beating Wrexham in the final...
I don't like watching my dad's teams. At Wembley, my mum said I was worse than dad when he watches me. I just want him to do so well. I was made up that they won. I didn't speak to anyone all day, I was on my own. I knew how much pressure was on the lads and my dad. It was such a big moment. He set himself that goal and managed to achieve it, I was super proud of him.

> "KEEPING SEVEN CLEAN SHEETS ON THE BOUNCE BECAME A JOKE. 'WE'VE GOT ANOTHER ONE!'"

You've said your dad was your hero growing up – were there any other keepers you admired?
When I joined Newcastle, at 14, I was obsessed with Wojciech Szczesny, who was playing for Arsenal. I watched YouTube videos, clips of him training, everything. It was his confidence and aggression. He was such a young lad and he'd come for crosses and smash people. I remember during one north London derby, a ball was bouncing through and he came speeding out, I think it was against Gareth Bale, and absolutely creamed him. Then he got back up and I thought, 'This guy is brilliant'. He wore No.53, too, which added to his character. I used to love him and still watch his matches now.

When you were 16, the late coach Steve Black introduced you to the concept of Kaizen, or continual improvement. Among the ideas he suggested was keeping a diary. Are you still abiding by Steve's advice?
Absolutely, he was a massive person in my life and helped me on this self-development journey, God bless his

soul. He was an advocate of continuous improvement and always lived his life that way until he died [in February]. He passed that on to me and it's exactly how I live my life. I still write a journal every day. I love looking back, I can see how I've matured from when I was 17. To begin with it was just about football, then other things come into your life so football takes up less space.

Any new concepts you've introduced to your routine this season?
I've tried to get better at switching off. I was bad for taking defeat home and dwelling on it, which wasn't good for the people around me. I try to leave it at the stadium, then pick it up the next morning. The manager [Ryan Lowe] is keen on individual development. I also worked with [first-team coach] Mike Marsh at Swansea and knew he was big on making you a better player and a better person. That was a massive reason for coming to Preston. The boss has developed players wherever he's been and my goalkeeper coach, Mike Pollitt, is always working on improving my game. It's a big, historic club and they're giving me the chance to play.

Were you aware of the rivalry with Blackpool when you arrived?
I wasn't until I turned up with orange boots and the manager said, 'You can't wear them'. I had to swap them pretty fast! The atmosphere when we played Blackpool was lively, even if the result wasn't great [a 4-2 win for Blackpool]. But the two sets of supporters showed unbelievable passion.

You started Newcastle's opening four Premier League games last term, then played only once on loan at Bournemouth. A frustrating year?
It was disappointing and quite an anti-climax. But I had to maintain high standards every day and, without that work, I wouldn't have made the start I have to this season. Anyone in the Championship will tell you they want to play in the Premier League. I had four matches and what an experience. I just want to play as high as possible.

What about England? You've got winner's medals from the Under-17 Euros and 2017 U20 World Cup...
It's not something I think about. I try to focus on my club and whatever happens will happen. England have great keepers and I've watched this World Cup as a fan. I enjoy studying all the different types of goalkeepers.

What are your future goals?
To keep playing well and helping this team. Then to keep being a good person, son, brother and boyfriend – and helping the people around me. Those are always my main focuses.

NON-LEAGUE NEWS

STAVING OFF RETIREMENT

Brett Pitman swapped League Two for the ninth-tier in search of more playing time this season, and the goal-hungry veteran is enjoying an Indian summer...

After more than 600 Football League games and almost 200 goals across a 17-year career, Brett Pitman could have been forgiven for wanting to put his feet up and enjoy a well-deserved retirement.

Instead this summer, the 34-year-old striker made a drastic drop, from newly promoted League One club Bristol Rovers to ninth-tier Portchester.

The former EFL stalwart experienced a blistering start to life at the Wessex League Premier Division club, scoring 28 goals in his first 18 starts including a hat-trick and last-minute winner in a vital 3-2 win away at Portland in November. A week later, he struck four in an 8-1 drubbing of Alresford. This form has helped to make the Royals early promotion contenders.

"I expected to score goals, as I do whatever level I play at," Pitman tells *FFT*. "That part hasn't surprised me, but the team going unbeaten in our first 13 league matches was great. We expected to do well, but to have that start is brilliant."

After joining Bristol Rovers at the start of 2021-22, the Channel Islander quickly found he couldn't break into Joey Barton's first team. Desperate to play, he then endured a difficult loan at National League side Eastleigh.

"I loved my time at Bristol Rovers – it's a really good club," he reflects. "Although I personally wasn't very successful, it was nice to see them promoted last season as there are good people there. Going to Eastleigh was a strange time. I didn't feel I was used enough, or used properly.

"I didn't enjoy anything about it, and that's why my next move was so important. It was imperative that I was going to enjoy myself, and I'm delighted it has worked out well at Portchester to date."

> "ALL THE PORTCHESTER LADS HAVE BEEN CLASS AND I CAN'T SEE WHY I WOULDN'T CONTINUE"

There has been some adjustment required with the change in standard. "The quality of the opposition has been mixed if I'm honest," he admits. "There have been some good teams that have given us a stern test. On the flip side there have been some poor, disorganised teams and we've taken advantage of that.

"No matter what level you play at, you play to win. Whether it's football or golf I just want to win, no matter what. When I came here, I wanted to enjoy my football. The Portchester lads have been class and helped me to fit in. I've been one of the lads. I'm relishing the here and now; I'm not looking beyond this season. As long as I can contribute on the pitch, I can't see why I wouldn't continue."

The Jersey-born goal-poacher had a prolific Football League career, representing Bournemouth, Bristol City, Ipswich and Portsmouth among others. At the Cherries – where he now works as an under-23s coach – Pitman earned two promotions in three seasons under Eddie Howe.

"Eddie was the main factor in those promotions with Bournemouth," he recalls. "To achieve what he did, he recruited good players, good people and coached them really well. That's probably the easiest way to put it. We had good players, but he coached them to be better players.

"At Newcastle, he has united the fans and the players – before, they may have been against each other. His work ethic is frightening, that's what sets him apart from others."

Work ethic is something Pitman knows a thing or two about. While most of his peers have got their carpet slippers on, he'll be wearing his shooting boots a little while yet.

James Ayles

FORZA PORTCHY
SPURWAY

Picture @AFCPortchester

BEST&WORST

DERBY COUNTY

Ollie Wright, author of *Tens and Nervous: Derby in the 2010s*, recalls administration and Wanchope wizardry

XI

BEST: Mart Poom, Jacob Laursen, Igor Stimac, Shaun Barker, Chris Powell, Will Hughes, Aljosa Asanovic, Seth Johnson, Stefano Eranio, Francesco Baiano, Paolo Wanchope.

WORST: Kelle Roos, Con Blatsis, Claude Davis, Bjorn Otto Bragstad, Andy Griffin, Benny Feilhaber, Andy Todd, Eddie Lewis, Bob Malcolm, Dean Holdsworth, Stern John.

PLAYER

B: Stimac [right] raised the bar after Jim Smith signed him from Hajduk Split for the princely sum of £1.57 million. Smith changed the Rams' system to a back three to suit Igor. The result was an epic unbeaten spree, promotion and a fine spell in the Premier League.

W: Davis, an ungainly centre-back, cost £3m and was nicknamed 'Bambi on Ice' for his gaffes in a short, nightmarish spell with us.

DERBY COUNTY
PUMA

MOMENT

B: A 3-0 win over Arsenal at Pride Park in 1997 [right]. With every goal, we chanted, "Seaman, Seaman, what's the score?" The England goalkeeper responded by giving us the finger.

W: In our administration nightmare, Mel Morris tried to sell Derby to a man named Erik Alonso. A cursory Google search could have told him that Alonso had no business pedigree whatsoever.

SEASON

B: The 1997-98 campaign remains the high-water mark of my time as a Ram. A side built by Smith and coached by Steve McClaren played superb football and finished in the Premier League's top half with the brilliant Wanchope banging in the goals, backed up by the class of Eranio in midfield, Stimac at the back and Poom in goal.

W: Our 2007-08 squad was patched together by Billy Davies, disastrously deconstructed by Paul Jewell, and so laughably incapable of competing in the top flight that our record low points total [11] will likely never be matched.

MANAGER

B: Jim Smith was probably the best Derby manager since Brian Clough.

W: Paul Jewell was recruited after Billy Davies effectively jumped ship in 2007 and reduced an already ropey squad to a rudderless and unmotivated rabble. By the time Jewell was relieved of his duties, the Rams were at serious risk of relegation to League One.

GOAL

B: Johnny Russell's thumping 20-yard drive in 2013-14's 5-0 demolition of Nottingham Forest. I knew it was in as soon as it left his boot.

W: QPR's Bobby Zamora scoring at the death at Wembley, also in 2014, denying us promotion to the Premier League.

CULT HERO

B: David Clowes [right] paid £40m to save the Rams from liquidation. For a man with such genuine financial clout, he has always come across as a proper fan.

W: Young American forward Conor Doyle [below] was given opportunities by Nigel Clough but was unable to make the grade. Some fans seemed to unfairly associate him with the ownership at the time, a penny-pinching North American consortium by the name of GSE.

CHANT

B: "Deducted 21 points, but we don't give a f**k, 'cos we are Derby County and we are staying up!" We ultimately didn't survive in the Championship last season, but the togetherness instilled in the fanbase as a result of the Rams' fight against unbelievable odds was incredible.

W: "We're having a party when Derby County die" – Those who sang that at us before we were rescued by Clowes are beneath contempt.

AWAY TRIP

B: My first trip to Barnsley. I hadn't been before and as we walked up a hill towards the ground, a friend said to me, "When we get to the top, be ready for one of the greatest sights in world football." I looked down upon Oakwell, in all of its squat, corrugated iron... and splendour? We won, handily.

W: Going by train to Scunthorpe felt like heading to the end of the Earth. The town was jaded, the walk to the ground interminable, the weather grey and wet, and the game a very forgettable 0-0 draw. The whole experience that day was just epically grim.

BOY'S A BIT SPECIAL

Classic Football Shirts

TAYLOR HARWOOD-BELLIS

BURNLEY

THE LOWDOWN The Stockport-born stopper rose through the same local youth leagues as Phil Foden and both entered Manchester City's academy. Harwood-Bellis made his first-team debut aged 17 in a 3-0 League Cup win at Preston in September 2019, the first of eight appearances for Pep Guardiola's side, but now the central defender is starring on loan in the Championship with Burnley. His boss at the club? Vincent Kompany, who knows a thing or two about keeping clean sheets at the Etihad Stadium.

HIGHLIGHT Harwood-Bellis, 20, has already played Champions League football and scored for City's first team, notching against Port Vale in the 2019-20 FA Cup Third Round.

DID YOU KNOW? At the age of 14, he and Kelechi Iheanacho were chosen to officially welcome Guardiola at his Manchester City unveiling in 2016.

WHAT'S NEXT? Promotion with the Clarets is the primary objective for Harwood-Bellis this season, before earning plenty of minutes in the Premier League next term. Which club he represents may depend on how the rest of this campaign goes.

KIT CRIMES | CLYDEBANK, 1993-94

Wet Wet Wet
Wet Wet Wet
Wet Wet Wet

Bands can provide cool shirt sponsors – think The Libertines at Margate, or Goldie Lookin' Chain at Newport. Less trendy is having Wet Wet Wet on your midriff a la Scottish second-tier side Clydebank, whose players felt uneasy in their fingers and their toes. The local musicians backed the club for two mediocre years before band and team faded into obscurity; the latter became Airdrie United in 2002.

RECORD BREAKERS

HANS GILLHAUS

PSV TO ABERDEEN | 1989

£650,000

PEDIGREE PSV recruited Gillhaus, a free-scoring youngster with Den Bosch, in 1987 to replace the goals of Milan-bound Ruud Gullit. The new man was rampant as PSV won an historic treble. Gillhaus also helped the Netherlands to qualify for Euro 88, a competition they'd eventually win, but was overlooked for their squad. He'd be back in for Italia 90 – as an Aberdeen player.

THE SITUATION His opportunities were limited by superstar Romario arriving in Eindhoven ("The rest of the world was probably behind Romario," Gillhaus later remarked) and Aberdeen pounced. Fans were gobsmacked to see a 25-year-old Dutch international and recent European Cup winner unveiled at Pittodrie for a club-record fee.

GOOD VALUE? His brace on debut included a stellar overhead kick, before he inspired Aberdeen to Scottish Cup final glory in 1990. He fired the Dons to within a whisker of the 1990-91 Scottish title, too, only for the club to miss out on the final day. A third campaign with the club was ravaged by injury but, by then, Gillhaus had cemented his hero status among locals already.

OUTCOME Gillhaus returned to his native land with Vitesse before a nomadic end to his career took in trips to Japan and Finland. Winding up back at Den Bosch, he steered them to the second-tier title, then retired, remembered fondly for his goals – not least by Aberdeen fans.

SEASON OF SHAME

BARNET 2013-14

Bees were over the moon when a former Champions League winner took charge on a player-manager basis – that is, until the red mist descended

There are shock signings, and then there are those that feel like something from a teenager's *Football Manager* save. The latter was certainly the case when Edgar Davids, a Champions League winner with Ajax and alumnus of clubs including Juventus, Milan, Barcelona and Inter, rocked up at League Two minnows Barnet in October 2012.

The dreadlocked, goggle-sporting Dutchman, nicknamed 'Pitbull' due to his tenacious displays, was already living in north London following a late-career stint with Tottenham, and had previously been snapped at Barnet's 6,500-capacity Hive Stadium enjoying fourth-tier matches as a fan. Now, an icon of the game, and a member of France 98's Team of the Tournament, was announcing his ambition to help the stuttering Bees stay in the Football League.

Nobody was expecting Camp Nou performances from the then 39-year-old, who was two years retired, but supporters were giddy with the arrival of someone who had graced the cover of *FIFA 2003*.

As player-manager alongside Mark Robson, Davids bossed the midfield on his debut, guiding his team to a 4-0 win over Northampton – the bottom club's first victory in 13 matches. They'd collect another seven points from their next three league fixtures and looked to be turning a corner. Though Barnet were eventually relegated on the final day of the season, Bees were buzzing with the impact he'd had.

So when the 74-cap Dutch international declared that he was up for leading the club in their upcoming Conference Premier tilt, everybody was thrilled. "He has started a football revolution here, and we hope that we can maintain the attractive style of play we developed under him in the Football League," said Barnet chairman Tony Kleanthous. "It's a measure of the man that he wants to stay to finish the job he started. Once a Bee, always a Bee!"

That positivity was short-lived, however, as Davids appeared to let his new-found local hero status go to his head. After naming himself club captain, he assigned himself the No.1 jersey to "set a trend" of midfielders wearing the number, and made an arrangement with the board that he wouldn't travel to away matches if he felt they were too far away. Moreover, his players quickly became fed up with his big-time attitude around the training ground.

"He wouldn't show up for training, then, an hour in, you'd see his £100,000 Bentley drive across the car park and right down on to the pitches," remembered ex-Bees striker Jake Hyde. "He'd be sat behind the goal with the heating on, feet up on the dashboard watching. Then he'd start himself on the weekend!"

After sitting out the opening 10 league matches of 2013-14, an ill-disciplined Davids picked up four yellow cards and three reds during his opening nine appearances, blaming referees for picking on him due to his illustrious past. "Yes I am a target," grumbled Davids. "I don't think I'm going to play any more as they are taking away the fun."

The club agreed with the last part, terminating his deal by mutual consent in January 2014 as the Bees lay 10th. Under replacement Paul Fairclough, they finished the campaign in eighth.

Davids' reputation as a player continues to serve him well in coaching – he was Netherlands' gaffer Louis van Gaal's assistant manager in Qatar.

Bees fans can look back on a memorable period in which a three-time Serie A champion anchored their midfield. While English football fans were treated to an answer to that burning question: Can a world-class player really do it on a wet, windy day at Salisbury? Yes, until he gets sent off. Again.

"AT TRAINING, DAVIDS DROVE HIS BENTLEY PITCHSIDE AND SAT THERE WITH THE HEATING ON"

EFL NEWS

CHANNEL THE FEAR

Drewe Broughton's journeyman career ended with a sex addiction and spiralling debts – now he uses those lessons to help footballers manage their mindsets

A loan spell at Nuneaton Borough might not seem the obvious setting for an epiphany, but for former striker Drewe Broughton, a 2000 stint with the non-league outfit was key to convincing him to take on a whole new persona. Without it, he would never have become 'The Fear Coach'.

The future Peterborough and Rotherham hitman made more than 500 appearances across a 16-year professional career and has now reinvented himself as a psychological guru, working with top players and coaches to help them negotiate the mental anguish of the game. Clients have included Wales' Euro 2016 hero Hal-Robson Kanu.

Broughton experienced every high and low possible at 22 different clubs, and now channels those experiences into the advice he offers athletes. Looking back, he pinpoints his loan from Peterborough to Nuneaton as the start of that journey.

"I arrived at Nuneaton a couple of years after scoring against Wolves at Molineux for [second-tier] Norwich – I was playing in huge stadiums and went with England Under-20s to the World Cup with Jamie Carragher and Michael Owen," recalls Broughton.

"Then I'm at Nuneaton Borough and, with the greatest of respect, I thought, 'What the f**k am I doing here? It's ridiculous'. I felt this loss of self. I began to wonder who I was and what I wanted from sport.

"Rather than give up, I decided that Nuneaton was a big chance to reset. I found, during my six weeks there, a simplicity to who I was. I battled for the next 12 years to hang on to that."

Broughton used that spell in the fifth-tier to springboard his prospects, becoming a serial botherer of Football League defences for the next decade.

Though he forged a decent career, Broughton struggled to handle that "grey area of feelings" between the dressing-room expectation of being a battering-ram forward and his sensitivity and emotion as a person. His private life proceeded to unravel without proper support.

After retiring in 2012, Broughton checked into the Sporting Chance clinic for help with sex addiction. It led to Broughton's second moment of inspiration – he wanted to use his experiences to help others focus on being the best players they can be.

"Ten years ago, I found myself in rehab, having lost everything," the 44-year-old tells *FFT* now. "I was sleeping on my brother's sofa and was £80,000 in debt. I'd been a good pro during my career, but I'd struggled mentally. I'd been far too analytical, too afraid of failing – the desire to win in some aspects was so big that I over-controlled everything."

After leaving rehab, Broughton started working with other struggling players – similar to how he'd initially picked himself up at Nuneaton.

"I help players and coaches to turn a corner," he says. "Exactly what I do depends on how much support they need, but I focus on different topics – fear, authenticity, ego – and aid them on a journey of self-discovery.

"When a player isn't playing well, it's not because they've become bad at their job – it means they've lost that sense of self. First, you need to recapture your own identity."

Lesson one, a trip to Nuneaton.

Chris Evans

CLAIMS TO FAME
AFC WIMBLEDON

1 WASTING NO TIME

Following the club's formation in 2002 (after the original was controversially relocated to Milton Keynes) AFC Wimbledon took just nine seasons to become a Football League side. They're the only team founded in the 21st century to do so, taking in five promotions from the Combined Counties all the way up to League Two. They spent six seasons in League One from 2016-17, but went down last term. Next stop the Champions League?

2 REAL INVINCIBLES

Forget Arsenal's 2003-04 vintage, the Gunners weren't even the standout English side that year! AFC Wimbledon actually hold the record for the longest unbeaten league streak in English football history, with 78 consecutive games without a loss between February 2003 and December 2004. Decent.

3 BEAST MODE

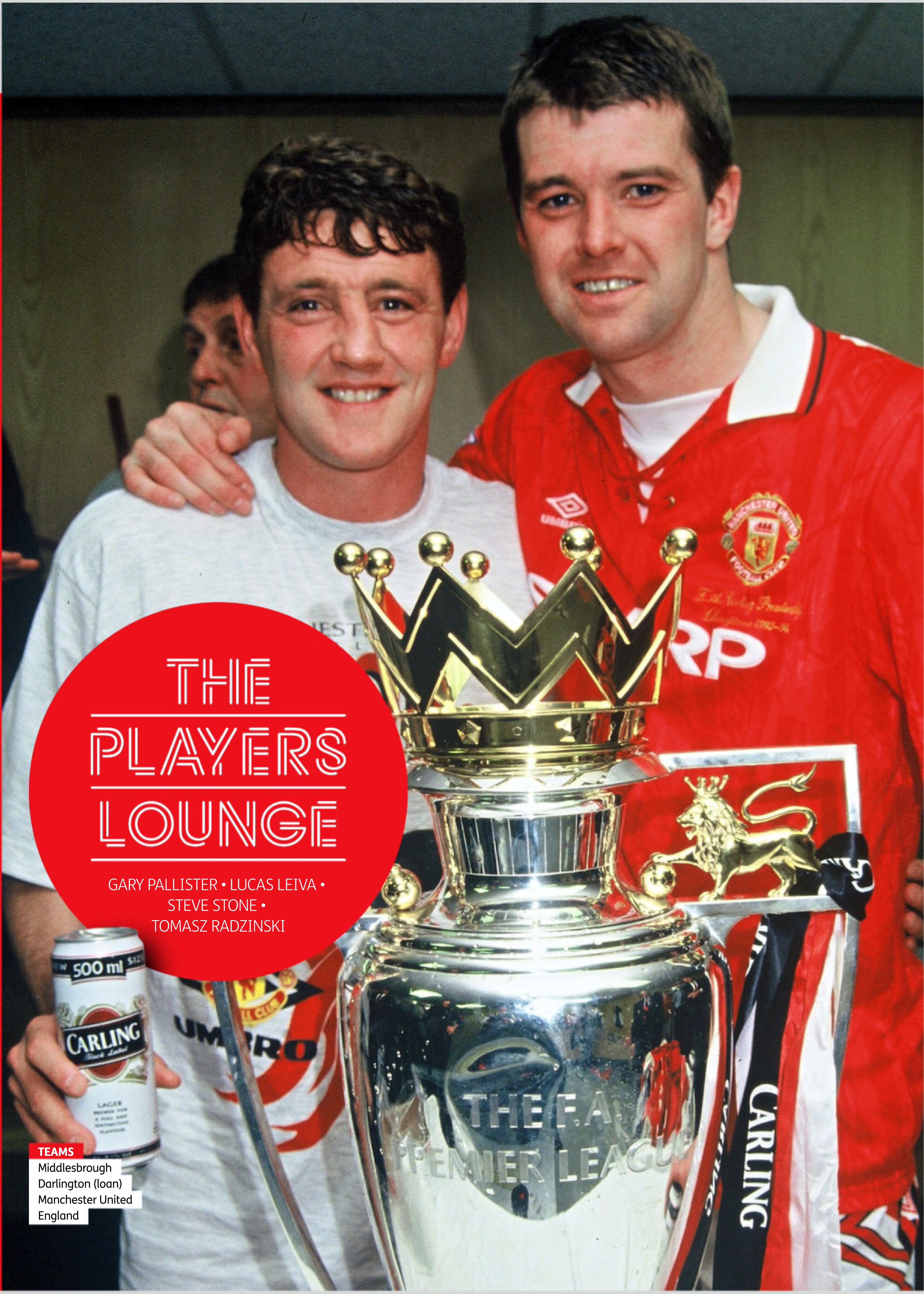
From 2014 to 2016, the League Two Dons contained a cult hero of the *FIFA* computer game franchise. Powerhouse Adebayo Akinfenwa was regularly listed as the title's strongest player, with a score of 99 out of 100. The self-proclaimed 'Beast' received a Guinness World Record for his troubles as well.

4 HOME SWEET HOME

In November 2020, the Dons finally departed Kingsmeadow, in Kingston upon Thames, for their newly built Plough Lane stadium, just 200 yards from the original Wimbledon's home in south-west London. The 9,000-seat ground was paid for by the club's fans and already has permission to be extended to 20,000 if required.

5 SOLID DEFENDING

Few football squads can claim a member of a chart-topping rap group, but that's precisely what the Dons had. In 2003 Wimbledon signed left-back Michael Harvey, better known as So Solid Crew's MC Harvey. Seldom played 90 minutes, coming off with *21 Seconds* to go.

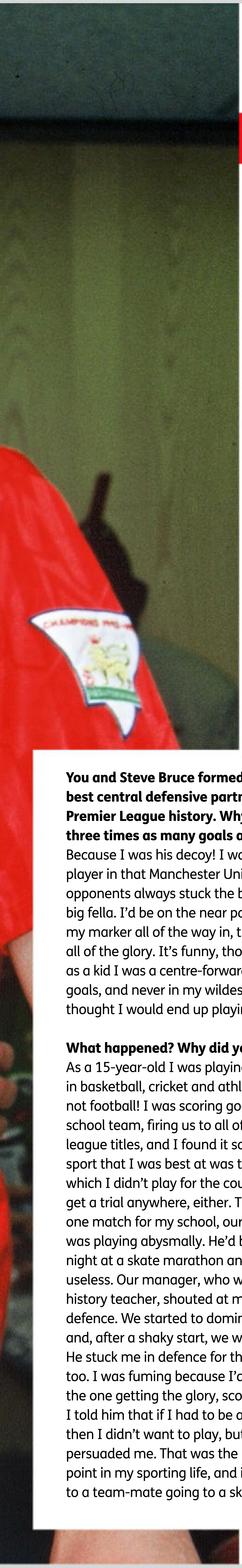

500 ml
CARLING
UMBRO
THE F.A. PREMIER LEAGUE
CARLING

THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

GARY PALLISTER • LUCAS LEIVA •
STEVE STONE •
TOMASZ RADZINSKI

TEAMS

Middlesbrough
Darlington (loan)
Manchester United
England



GARY PALLISTER

"BRUCEY HAS ME TO THANK FOR SCORING SO MANY GOALS AT UNITED. I WAS HIS DECOY!"

The ex-Manchester United and England defender reveals all about Boro, boozing and big bust-ups with Rioch and Fergie

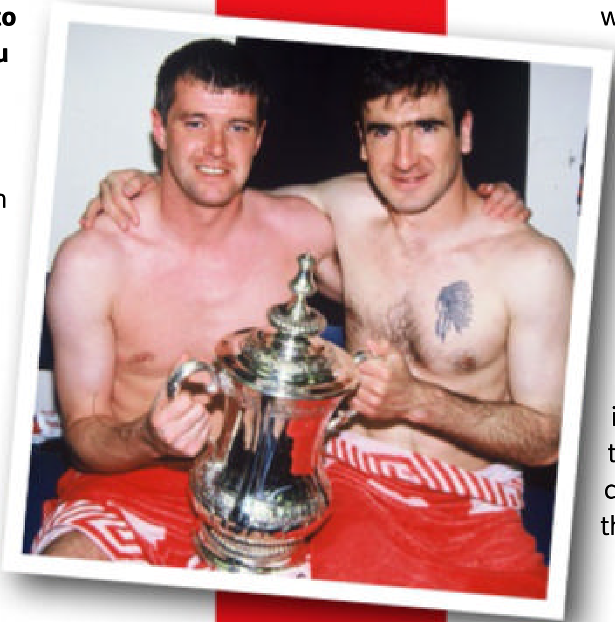
Interview Ian Murtagh

You and Steve Bruce formed one of the best central defensive partnerships in Premier League history. Why did he score three times as many goals as you did?
Because I was his decoy! I was the tallest player in that Manchester United team and opponents always stuck the big fella on the big fella. I'd be on the near post, or I'd run my marker all of the way in, then Brucey got all of the glory. It's funny, though, because as a kid I was a centre-forward, loved scoring goals, and never in my wildest dreams thought I would end up playing at the back.

What happened? Why did you switch?
As a 15-year-old I was playing for my county in basketball, cricket and athletics – but not football! I was scoring goals for my school team, firing us to all of the cups and league titles, and I found it so odd that the sport that I was best at was the only one in which I didn't play for the county. I couldn't get a trial anywhere, either. Then, during one match for my school, our centre-back was playing abysmally. He'd been up all night at a skate marathon and was utterly useless. Our manager, who was also my history teacher, shouted at me to go in defence. We started to dominate the game and, after a shaky start, we won comfortably. He stuck me in defence for the next game, too. I was fuming because I'd always been the one getting the glory, scoring the goals. I told him that if I had to be a defender, then I didn't want to play, but thankfully he persuaded me. That was the big turning point in my sporting life, and it was all thanks to a team-mate going to a skate marathon!

After joining Middlesbrough at 19, you played under Bruce Rioch there. Who had the worse temper: Rioch or Alex Ferguson?
Towards the end of my Boro career, I kept putting in transfer requests and Rioch was very difficult with me. Liverpool made a bid and I had to find out from the telly that it had been rejected. I was fuming and asked him about it, but he didn't even give me an answer. I eventually got my move to United and I guess you could say my dealings with Rioch prepared me for Fergie's hairdryer, but there was a big difference between the two. When Fergie lost his temper, it was usually forgotten the following day. You could have a ding-dong with him on Thursday and then a laugh with him in training on Friday. That certainly wasn't the case with Rioch. I fell out with him too many times; often we wouldn't speak for weeks. Great managers know how to channel their emotions, and Fergie didn't allow anything to fester in the dressing room.

It must have been daunting to represent England before you had played in the top flight...
When I sat down for dinner in the England camp for the first time, with Bryan Robson, Glenn Hoddle, Peter Reid and Peter Shilton on my table, I could hardly hold my knife and fork. These were guys I'd only really seen on telly. Little did I know then that Robbo would go on to become one of my best mates in football, but even when he barely knew me, he was great. Before my debut he said, "I know you're nervous, but just keep looking for me. If I'm asking for the ball, just pass it." He shepherded me through that game and was a calming influence, like he was throughout my career. I work with him every matchday at Old Trafford now, in one of the sponsor's lounges, and we're always taking the piss out of each other. I can hardly believe the journey we've been on together since 1988.



Would you agree you initially struggled at Old Trafford after arriving for a record fee?
Well, yes and no. We lost at home to Norwich on my debut, and I gave away a penalty and was blamed for their other goal. A week later I thought I was up and running, but then came that Manchester derby when City beat us 5-1. It was a weird game, because for 10 minutes we battered them but then there was a crowd invasion, and when the game resumed they had six shots and scored five times. That was one of the few times Fergie didn't lose it afterwards. Like the rest of us, he was shell-shocked. Those early weeks were a mixed bag, but I'm annoyed by the popular misconception that I was awful in my first season – I won Player of the Year...

It took a few years for Ferguson's United to win the title. Would you have won it at all had Eric Cantona not arrived?
I've always said we were a Formula One car and Eric was our driver, but you can't say we wouldn't have been champions without him. We were building and improving and, really, we should have won the league instead of Leeds the season before the Premier League was launched. We had to play four games in seven days and the squad was riddled with injuries; everything conspired against us and the authorities did nothing to help us. But we were a better side than Leeds. I'm convinced of that, because we beat them three times out of four, knocking them out of the FA Cup and the League Cup. Of course everyone was devastated when we were just pipped at the post, but we knew we were on course to win the title sooner rather than later. Eric gave us that x-factor which transformed us from a good team to a very good one.

Who was the biggest drinker at United?
Robbo wins that hands-down! But United were the rule, not the exception. Liverpool, Arsenal and everyone else did what we did. Football then was a working-class game and working-class men like their beer!

What was it like to have Robson as your manager when you returned to Middlesbrough at the end of your career?
Strange. Calling him 'boss' took some getting used to. I didn't enjoy my last year there because my back went and I barely played, and I felt as if I'd let him down, but it certainly wasn't difficult for me to play under him. At the football club, he was my gaffer; away from the club, he was still my mate.

LUCAS LEIVA

"WE WERE SO CERTAIN THAT WE WOULD BEAT CHELSEA – THEN STEVIE SLIPPED"

The Brazilian midfield terrier on learning from Liverpool legends, title trauma and his friendship with Jurgen Klopp

Interview Caio Carrieri

Now you're back at Gremio, you've played for just three different clubs in a 16-year career. Is loyalty important to you?
Actually, I never planned that! I didn't think I'd stay 10 years at Liverpool or five at Lazio. When I first arrived from Brazil, I thought I'd play maybe 12 years in Europe before going home and retiring at 35. But I'm 36 now and feeling pretty good. Perhaps the secret is that wherever I've been, I've created roots with both the club and the fans. I spent almost five years at Gremio, including time in the academy at the start of my journey. Then at Liverpool, despite a tough start, I always felt I was able to contribute, so I stayed and stayed. I eventually lost my place in the side, so I looked for a change. At Lazio I lifted the Coppa Italia, which was a special privilege.

What are your memories of your younger days as a Gremio player?
My debut campaign in the first team was incredible, as I helped us to win promotion back to the top flight following some tough years. My first few years at Gremio were so intense. In 2005, I was promoted to the first team; the following year, I won the Golden Ball as the best player in the league; and in 2007 I played in the Copa Libertadores final and won my first cap for Brazil. Everything was happening so quickly.

How did your move to Liverpool happen?
Also in 2007, I was picked to play for the national team in the South American Under-20 Championship. We won the tournament and, afterwards, Liverpool approached my agent. Rafael Benitez called me and invited me to see the club's facilities and explore the city – I was blown away! At the time, there weren't many Brazilians in the Premier League, and those who were there before me had experience in another European league prior to going to England. However, that wasn't the case for me. I struggled a lot at the beginning with a new culture and the pressure of playing for such a massive club.

When did you really start to feel at home?
In my third season, a few players left the club and I made more than 50 appearances across the campaign. It was actually Rafa's last season at Anfield. I put in loads of good performances and finally started to feel that I was a key member of the squad. From then on, I tried to enjoy every single moment. Liverpool is a special club and I felt I was part of a huge family. Whoever has the privilege to live in that unique atmosphere knows what I mean. I received so much affection and support from the club, staff and fans; I felt at home, even in the tough moments.

How did it feel to train and play alongside midfield legends such as Steven Gerrard, Xabi Alonso and Javier Mascherano?
To train alongside those guys every day was special. Much of my understanding of how to play the game was learnt by playing with and watching them. Each had his own unique strengths. With those three ahead of me in the pecking order, Rafa kept telling me to be patient and to take my chances when they came. Often, because Premier League squads were smaller then, I didn't even make the matchday squad. When Xabi Alonso joined Real Madrid, I started to get more minutes.

How important was Gerrard to Liverpool?
I played alongside some legends for Brazil, but Stevie's aura was truly incredible. He was more than just a great player; he was born in the city and a fan himself. He played for his family, his friends and his people across the city. There was a lot of pressure on him as a captain. He breathed Liverpool 24/7. It was outstanding the way he conducted himself – I couldn't have more admiration for him as a man and as a player. What a fantastic guy. When I barely spoke the language, he came up to me and said, very slowly so I could understand, "Lucas, you can count on me for whatever you need – we're here to help you".

Do you have a proudest Liverpool moment?
There are many, to be honest. If I had to pick one off the top of my head, I would say my Premier League debut, which was against Everton. We were drawing, and Rafa brought

TEAMS
Gremio
Liverpool
Lazio
Brazil

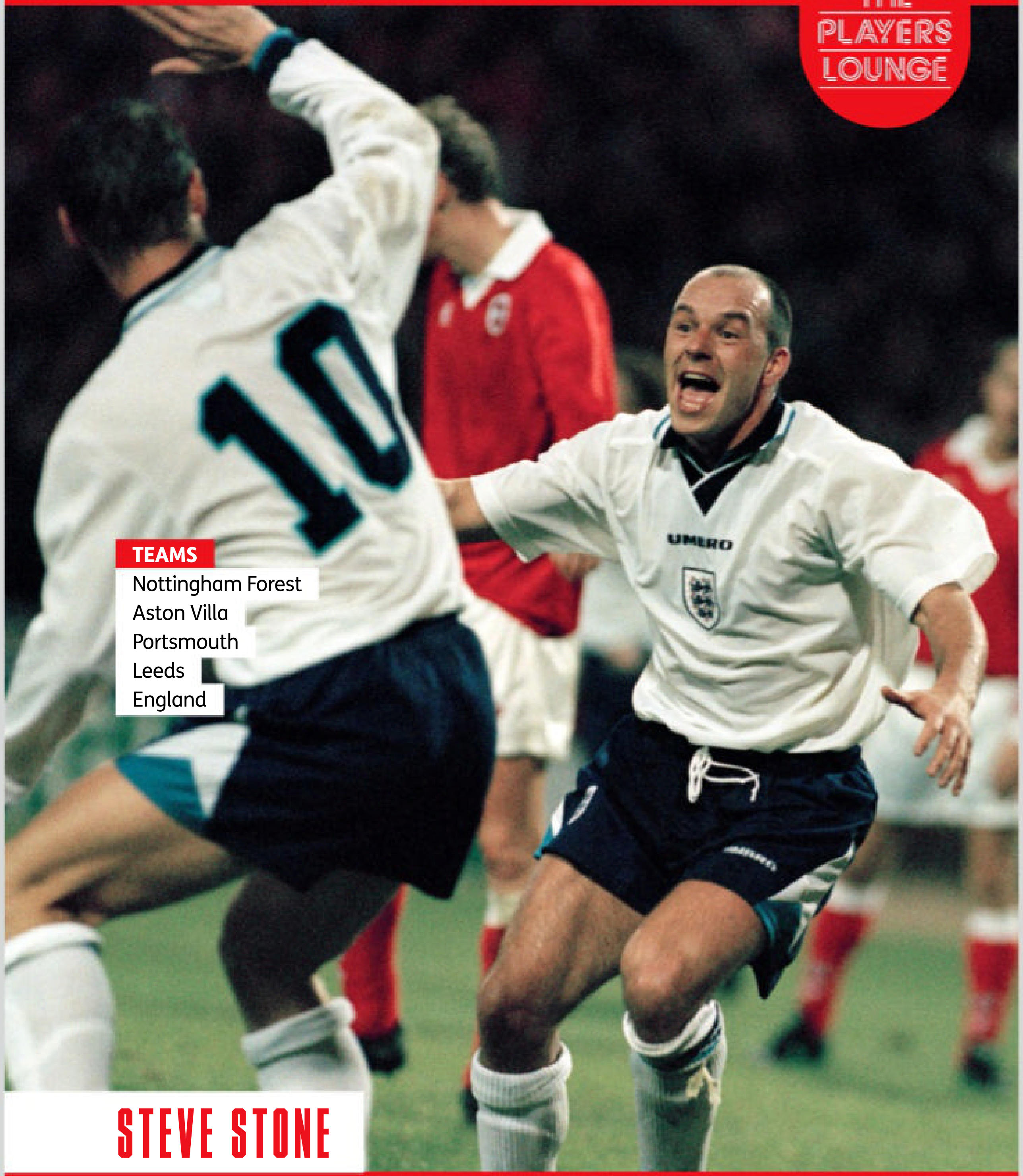
me on. I think there were 20 minutes left and they were a man down. I replaced Gerrard and won the penalty which gave us the win. It was a great way to introduce myself.

How gutted were you about the conclusion to Liverpool's 2013-14 Premier League title charge? When did it slip out of your hands?
We lost the title race in that Chelsea match. People talk about that Gerrard slip, but only because they want a moment to blame instead of thinking about the bigger picture. Everyone was confident that we would beat Chelsea, because we were on a winning streak. We could have drawn that match and then won the remaining two games to seal the title, but there was too much excitement going into the game. We were so sure we'd get all three points – nothing else crossed our minds. As soon as the game began, we realised Chelsea were playing simply to not lose. Maybe if we had changed our approach and gone for the draw, things might have been different. But there was huge pressure on Liverpool to win our first Premier League title and we wanted the win. Unfortunately, Gerrard slipped. If there was one guy who didn't deserve that, it was him. Sadly, we weren't able to save him the way he'd saved us so many times before. We didn't lose the title because of that match; we lost over the whole season. But that was a very dark day.

Was it tough to hear that you weren't part of the club's plans under Jurgen Klopp?
Actually, my Anfield departure was a mutual agreement. I'd lost my place in the team and wasn't able to contribute the way I had. I'd had an offer to leave one year earlier, but Klopp said he needed me as I could also play centre-back and we were short of options, so I stayed. The following year, Lazio came in for me and we knew it was the right time for me to go. We handled it as two friends – that's the relationship we had. I almost shed a tear when we reached an agreement, because it was on the day the squad flew to the US for pre-season and I had to say my goodbyes. But I was really glad to leave in the best way possible, and Klopp helped me get that right.

Looking back, how was life on Merseyside?
Many footballers live outside the city, but I always lived in the heart of it. Liverpool and its people were very warm and welcoming. I enjoyed the parks with my family so much. There was a lot of new development across Liverpool throughout my time there and it was even named European Capital of Culture in 2008. I felt proud to be a part of a cool and vibrant place. Both of my children were born in Liverpool and, whenever she can, my wife takes them back to see their friends and reconnect. It will always be in our hearts.

How much longer do you plan on playing?
I still feel good and want to keep playing for now. These days, with new advancements in recovery, nutrition and training, players can carry on for much longer. I haven't set a specific age to retire, but it will depend on the physical and mental side of things. ⊙



TEAMS
Nottingham Forest
Aston Villa
Portsmouth
Leeds
England

STEVE STONE

"THE PRESS KILLED US FOR THE DENTIST'S CHAIR PHOTOS, BUT WE HAD SUCH GREAT CAMARADERIE"

England's Euro 96 cameo-maker remembers doing Cloughie's gardening and having Michael Owen's chopper as a neighbour

Interview Ian Murtagh

You were part of the Euro 96 squad, and came off the bench a few times during the tournament. Tell us about that summer...
You look back and think, 'Wow, that was an incredible time'. My kids think I'm famous only for being one of the players featured in the *Three Lions* video with Baddiel, Skinner and Ian Broudie from the Lightning Seeds! Everybody still talks about Gazza and the dentist's chair. I was there that night. In fact, almost everybody was, because there was such a great camaraderie in that squad. It was unprofessional and the press murdered us but, at the time, it just felt like a good bit of team bonding. Thankfully, by the time we got knocked out we'd all been forgiven and had won the hearts of the nation.

What was the dressing room like after that semi-final shootout defeat to Germany?
It was a pretty tough place. To a man, we were devastated because everyone knew that whoever won that game would probably win the tournament. It wasn't about Gareth Southgate missing the penalty, even though he was down at the time; it was all about an opportunity missed. I won't lie: it still hurts me today. It always will.

Paul Gascoigne came agonisingly close to scoring the winner. You went to the same school as your fellow Geordie, didn't you?
Yes, Heathfield Comprehensive in Gateshead. Not many schools can lay claim to having two ex-pupils playing at the same Euros. He ►

was a few years older but when he broke into the Newcastle team, he'd often pay a visit. He was a huge inspiration for me. When I first got picked for England, both Gazza and Peter Beardsley were involved – two of my heroes growing up. I had to pinch myself.

Brian Clough gave you your Nottingham Forest debut. You must have some stories...
I joined Forest as a 14-year-old triallist and spent six years under Brian. He had his issues when he left in 1993, but I had some great times with him. He was such a charismatic person, who always seemed to have control of everything. Everyone was scared of him, including the chairman! He had that aura, but he could be so kind, too. The younger lads used to go and do his garden in the summer. He'd cook us a big meal and give us a glass of wine, even though we were under age! It was all about getting to know us. There were two sides to the man, and I saw both.

Forest was quite a rollercoaster for you: challenging at the top of the league one season, struggling the next...
When I first arrived, Stuart Pearce and Nigel Clough were the stars and we reached the 1991 FA Cup Final. I broke my leg in three successive years, so had struggled to break into the team. We went down the season Brian left and a lot of stars departed, which was when my chance really arrived. After promotion, we finished third in the Premier League in 1994-95 with the likes of Bryan Roy and Stan Collymore, and then qualified for Europe. It was a real success story.

At Aston Villa you got to play alongside a future England manager and a future presenter of *Homes Under the Hammer*...
[*Laughs*] Who'd have known they'd both go on to greatness? Gareth Southgate was someone everyone looked up to because of the way he handled himself. He was the one we all knew would step into management, and I'm not surprised he's done so well. Dion Dublin was a great guy – a larger-than-life character you couldn't fail to like. He was a real team leader. Mind you, I couldn't have imagined him breaking into daytime TV. But you see him now and you realise he's made for it. Dion is one of those people who could turn his hand to anything.

You were on the bench for the 2000 FA Cup Final defeat to Chelsea. How disappointed were you to not make the line-up?
Not at all, actually! I'd played against Bolton in the semi-final but picked up a bad knee injury in the next game. John Gregory did me a huge favour in putting me on the bench – I was only about 80 per cent fit. Maybe he let his heart rule his head because I'd been a big part of the cup run, and he threw me on with 20 minutes to go. I'll always be grateful.

How different was your relationship with Gregory's replacement, Graham Taylor?
Very, but it was never personal. He wanted to bring the younger players through and get some of the top earners off the wage bill.

Paul Merson left and I went a few months later. We had very different views on how the game should be played. He wanted it one way and I was brought up under Cloughie, playing it the other. There were no hard feelings. I was ready for a new challenge.

You linked up again with Merson, this time at Portsmouth, which seemed to go well...
I had two-and-a-half years there and couldn't have wished for any better. I spoke to Merse beforehand and he told me about Pompey's plans and how enjoyable it was under Harry Redknapp. He was spot on. His mantra was very straightforward: bring in good players and then let them all express themselves. Perfect! Merse was the talisman but Shaka Hislop and Gianluca Festa were as important. There were a lot of older pros in that team but we kept the club in the top flight for a couple of years. Harry was no coach but it hardly mattered – his man-management was excellent. He'd be by the training pitch and say, "You were excellent on Saturday." By the next weekend, you'd feel 10ft tall.

When he was at Newcastle, Michael Owen lived next door. Was he a good neighbour?
[*Laughs*] I probably saw more of Michael's helicopter than the man himself! He was always very courteous and polite, but he's not someone who would knock on your door and socialise. He just liked the quiet life. He would travel up from Chester in a helicopter and it often landed in his back garden – that tells you the size of the place he was renting.

Who was your best team-mate and boss, and what was your favourite game?
All really easy answers. Terry Venables was the best manager: years ahead of his time and incredibly intelligent. The best player was Stuart Pearce, who was also my hardest opponent because I'd come up against him in training every day. My favourite game was my second England cap. I came on for Jamie Redknapp after just five minutes in a friendly against Switzerland. We won 3-1 – I scored one and set one up. The front three was Alan Shearer, Teddy Sheringham and Steve Stone. Never mind the SAS partnership – we should have been talking about the SASAS combo! ○

TOMASZ RADZINSKI

"BEFORE MY DEBUT, I TOLD DUNC JUST TO FLICK THE BALL ON. HE SAID, 'SON, I'M NOT PLAYING WITH YOU. YOU'RE PLAYING WITH ME'"

Everton was eventful for the Canada international. So was go-karting with Jan Koller...

Interview Sean Cole

At Anderlecht, you formed a great strike partnership with the 6ft 8in Jan Koller. Why did you combine so well?
Jan's Czech and I'm Polish-born – the two languages are quite similar. Jan only spoke a bit of English and Flemish, so I translated for him. This relationship just grew. We went to concerts together. We went go-karting together. Imagine this massive guy sitting in a go-kart! If Jan scored, I was happy for him, and if I scored, he was happy for me. You sometimes see two strikers playing for themselves because they want to be the top scorer. With us, it was the opposite. It was an amazing partnership. He was one of the nicest, kindest guys you can imagine. With his size, you'd be running for the hills when you spotted him, but he was a gentle giant!

In 2000, your brace defeated Manchester United in the Champions League. How significant was that game for your career?
It's not only the two goals I scored – for the first 60 minutes, I was a handful. With a bit more luck, we could have easily scored three or four in the first half. My second goal went through Gary Neville's legs: it wasn't the hardest of shots, but it was very well-placed. With the other chances, Fabien Barthez made some brilliant saves. Sometimes just one game can make the difference in your career, as you never know who's watching.

How did your move to Everton come about?
In that January transfer window, there was serious interest from Valencia, but I wasn't ready to leave Anderlecht. The Champions League second group stage had started and

I had scored the winner in our first game, at home to Lazio. We still had to face Leeds and Real Madrid, so I didn't want to miss that. By the summer, Everton were the only team in for me. But I didn't mind – it's a great club. I met Alan Ball in Paris and he convinced me.

Tell us your first impressions of England...
The football was brilliant. It was like playing in the Champions League pretty much every week, so you were always motivated. Life was a bit more of an adjustment, because of the weather. It felt like it was raining 300 days a year! And in the winter, darkness fell at about 4pm. I was alone – my family was still in Canada and my girlfriend at the time didn't move with me to England, so the first few months were tough.

There were some big characters at Everton then, none more so than Duncan Ferguson. How did you get on with him?
He reminded me of Jan Koller, but scarier! Ahead of my first game, I said to Dunc that he could just flick the ball on and I'd run – it would be perfect because that's my strength. He said, "Son, I'm not playing with you. You're playing with me." I was like, 'Oh, fair enough!'

Wayne Rooney burst on to the scene during your second season. How much excitement was there about him at Everton?
You could see just how incredible he was. He scored goals like that one against Arsenal on a regular basis in training. He was only 16 but he never had a problem with the crowds – he really enjoyed them. The bigger they were, the better he played. That Arsenal goal made him realise he could do it in the big games as well. For me, that's when the switch flicked in his head. He never looked back.

That Rooney goal in October 2002 ended Arsenal's 30-game unbeaten run. But your goal that day often gets forgotten...
That's right! We won 2-1 thanks to Wayne's late strike, but I got the equaliser and then Wayne came on for me. It was unbelievable, stopping that Arsenal team in their tracks. I always enjoyed playing against them – their defenders were more football-minded and it showed. Their style suited me. They left lots of space to run into, which was my strength.

You joined Fulham in 2004, just as Chris Coleman was starting out as a manager. What was he like to play for?
He was the complete opposite of David Moyes at Everton. He was one of the guys, always chatting and joking with everybody. The training sessions were less repetitive and there weren't so many drills. When you have a manager like that, you definitely go that extra mile for him. Years later, I realised that Coleman is the perfect coach for a national team, as he proved with Wales, because you have to keep a nice, relaxed relationship with every single player and you don't have to do so much of the tactical work. You can keep everything nice and breezy. That's what he did as Fulham boss.

How did you find the challenge of coming up against Edwin van der Sar in training day in, day out?
It was absolutely ridiculous. When we had the chance to do shooting after training, I'd always hope that Edwin didn't stay behind! It's not only that he's a huge guy; his positioning was so good. When you went to shoot, there was no space to put the ball. It was amazing. Strikers and goalkeepers spend a lot of time together in shooting practice, and we had a good relationship because I knew Flemish and Dutch. Years later, Edwin invited me to his wedding in Amsterdam.

Overall, how do you reflect on the three years you spent at Fulham?
I really enjoyed it. They had a good training ground and lovely people around the club. It was a very nice, cosy stadium. I always enjoyed playing at Craven Cottage – it had a very special vibe to it. But we never played with two strikers up front – it was more of a 4-3-3 system and, as a winger, if you're in the bottom half of the table, you're more likely to be defending than attacking. That wasn't my strength. When you're signed as a striker, you're expected to get more goals. But I became a better footballer because of Chris Coleman and the way we had to play. I just didn't grow into the scoring machine that I had been in my head when I signed!

Why did your time at Fulham come to an end in the summer of 2007?
Chris Coleman had offered me a year's extension, but then we had a change of manager. Lawrie Sanchez came in for the last few games of the season and, though I was playing games, I didn't like that period at all. I didn't enjoy Lawrie's training sessions, or him as a person. I didn't want to stay there if I wasn't going to enjoy my football. The money would have been good, but my heart wouldn't have been in it. I didn't want to be miserable every day. I hadn't signed the extension yet, so we decided to part ways.

You spent a year in Greece after being at Fulham. Was that a culture shock?
It was an eye-opener. It was a professional league, but nowhere near the high level of Belgium or the Premier League. The quality of life really surprised me. It's so laid-back, especially coming from three years living in London to Xanthi, a small city of 80,000 people. There was no traffic and you were actually breathing fresh air because we were five minutes from the sea and five minutes from the mountains. Just a month after I'd joined, I could feel my lungs opening up!

How did you find the couple of years as sporting director of Lierse, after retiring?
I underestimated the amount of work and the number of people you have to deal with. It's not just players, but their parents, their agents and your bosses! You have to manage that time and still have a decent family life. My three daughters were young and I was leaving the house at 7am, only seeing them briefly for breakfast, and coming home after midnight. That was hard. We parted ways as I couldn't see it moving forwards.

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MY PERFECT XI

SHAUN WRIGHT-PHILLIPS

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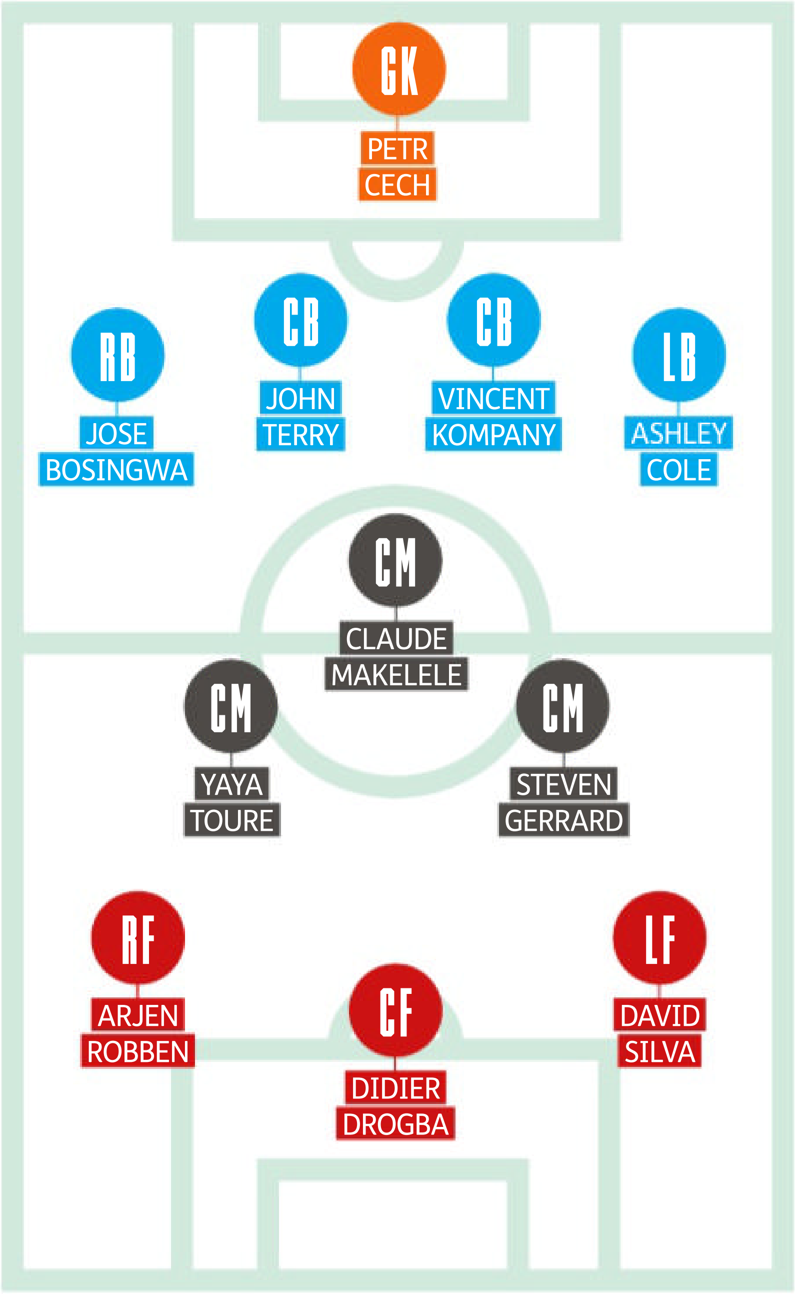
The former winger picks a side of greats he shared a pitch with, including a man so good they named a position after him. Best of all: this formation actually works...



THE GAFFER

JOSE MOURINHO
"I've had some really good managers, but none achieved what he did in the manner he did. He was so premeditated in his actions, yet always forward-thinking, and he defended his players."

THE SUBS

01 **JOE HART**

02 **RIO FERDINAND**

03 **FRANK LAMPARD**

PETR CECH
"As soon as I got to Chelsea, you could see he was special. It wasn't just his size; it was his agility and command of the box. He was a fantastic shot-stopper. A half-hearted shot wouldn't beat him – it had to be top-drawer."

JOSE BOSINGWA
"Jose was underrated: technically good, as well as being calm on the ball. He defended solidly pretty much all of the time and was very good in one-on-one situations, which is so important. And as soon as he got the ball, he always looked to go forward."

JOHN TERRY
"He was the leader: he fought for players and wore his heart on his sleeve. But he was also a very capable footballer with his feet. One thing I learned as an attacking player is that it's OK to lose the ball at times because there is cover at the back; you can trust the people behind you. He made me think that way."

VINCENT KOMPANY
"Vincent rose to prominence in a similar way to Terry – he had all of those same leadership qualities. He started off in midfield, but knew that he would be far more effective dropping to centre-back. What he achieved captaining Manchester City was outstanding. Playing against him was a wonderful challenge too."

ASHLEY COLE
"We had some terrific battles when he was at Arsenal, and to play with him at club and international level was a privilege. He was always one of the hardest defenders to beat as an attacker because he rarely dived in and didn't often go to ground. He made it a living hell to play against him."

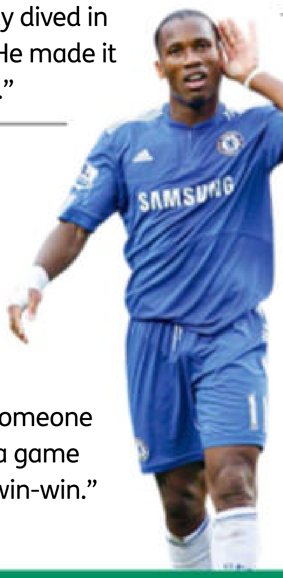
YAYA TOURE
"Phenomenal – unbelievable – and he never got the praise he deserved. He made the game look so easy, the way he'd glide past people, use both feet, create goals and score a lot of them, too. If you have someone who can dictate play *and* take a game by the scruff of the neck, it's a win-win."

CLAUDE MAKELELE
"He was a maestro. For me, he made the defensive midfield position what it is today. Amazingly, he rarely got booked, no matter how many free-kicks he gave away. He was happy going unseen, tidying up after people. Breaking down the play and providing simple passes was like a goal or an assist for Claude. He was so vital to Chelsea when I arrived."

STEVEN GERRARD
"People always ask me to compare him to Frank Lampard. Lamps was fantastic, but Stevie's footballing technique and the goals he scored were unreal. The way he carried Liverpool to win the Champions League, and throughout his career, was incredible. On top of that, he was a gentleman off the pitch."

ARJEN ROBBEN
"He was a different sort of winger to what we were used to seeing in the Premier League at that time. His change of direction at max speed was amazing and he would always find a way to wriggle past you. Even if you showed him onto his right foot, he was so sharp that he could go back to his left foot."

DIDIER DROGBA
"It didn't matter what the game was, Didier [below] always made sure defenders never wanted to see him again! If you wanted to be aggressive with him, he'd be aggressive, but he also knew when and where to win a foul. He was scarily good. It was a delight for me, as a winger, because he'd constantly fight and do everything he could to get on the end of your crosses."



DAVID SILVA
"I remember when he arrived at City – Joleon Lescott and I were wondering what all of the hype was about. We had a good laugh about it; Joleon said, 'He's about the same size as you!' It took us about 15 minutes in that first training session to realise how brilliant a player we had. From that day, we nicknamed David 'Merlin'."

Shaun spoke to FFT via Freebets.com

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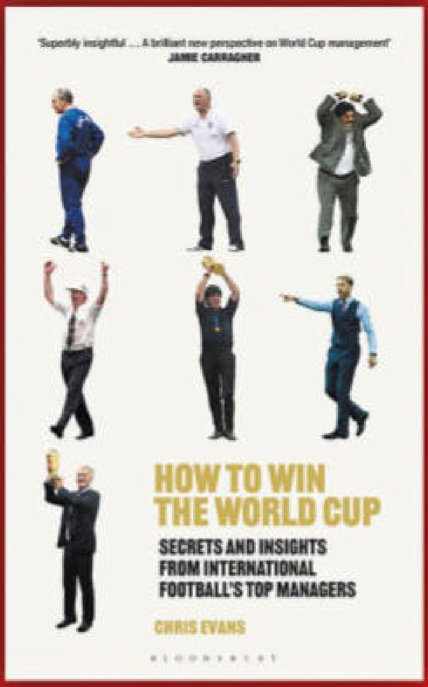
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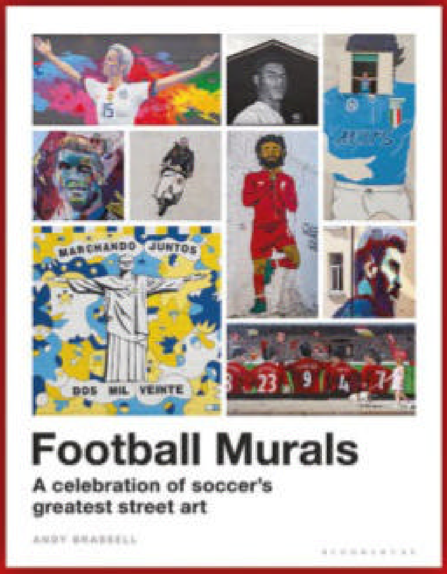
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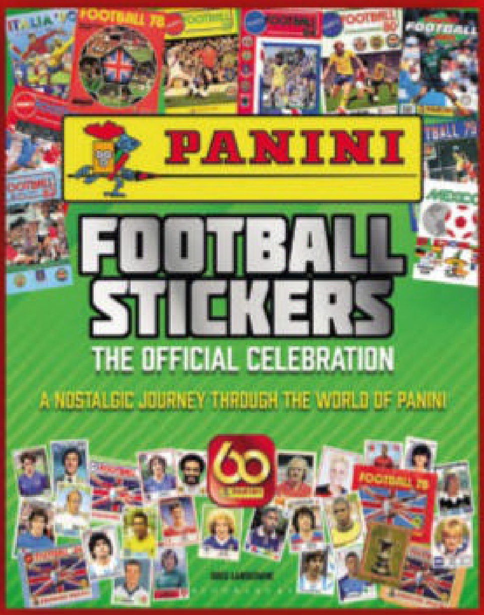
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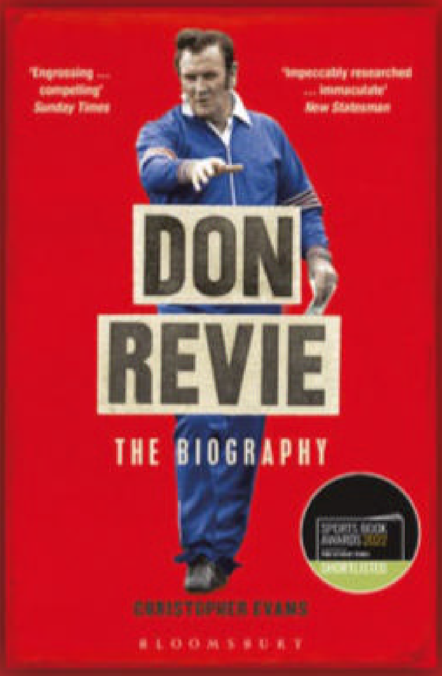
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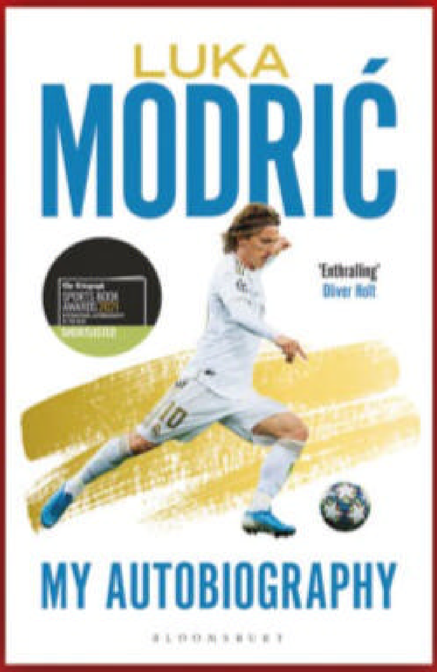
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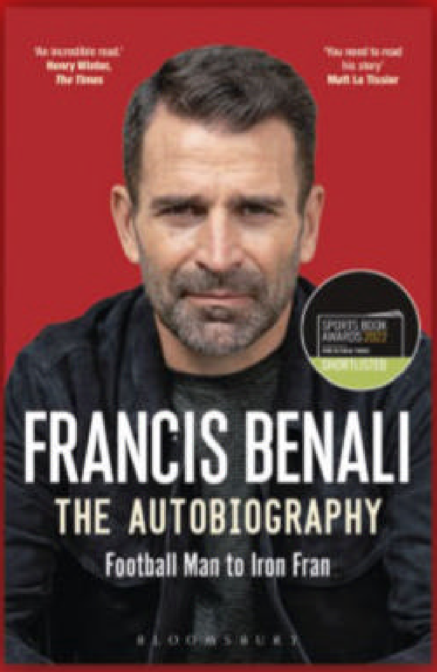
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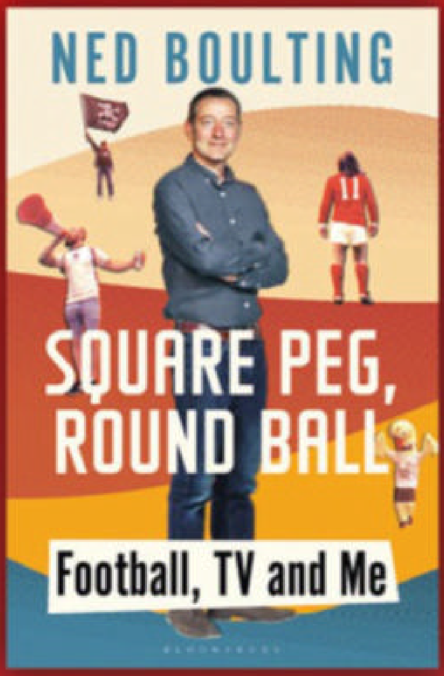
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